

Author's note: This story is a sequel to Harry Potter and the Antiquity Link, which begins the day after Voldemort's defeat. As in that story, the epilogue to Deathly Hallows is disregarded. Except for that, this is a canon story; canon is defined here as that which takes place in the books, not movies, interviews, or any other material.

Chapter 1

Preparation

Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

The words, hanging in midair just past the end of his bed, caused Harry Potter to awaken abruptly as it registered that something was in the room that shouldn't be. He read the words, then rolled his eyes. It had to be George, no doubt at the urging of Fred's ghost. Harry reached for the Elder Wand, placed on the stand beside his bed the night before. He pointed it at the words, which noiselessly dissipated.

As he stretched and sat up in Sirius's old bed, he reflected on the message. Fred's other early morning visits had always been deliberately humorous, even silly, but this seemed meant to be taken seriously. Yesterday he had stood in front of a crowd of a few thousand in Diagon Alley and formally accepted the title and responsibility of Auror Leader, giving him sole and unchallenged authority over the Aurors, and law enforcement in general in wizarding England. He hadn't sought it, but he had accepted it, and this was the first morning he had woken up possessing that awesome burden. The first day of the rest of my life, indeed, he thought wryly. It definitely feels like that. No more hiding in this house letting the world pass me by, relaxing as that was for the short time I got to do it. Now I have thousands of wizards relying on me for their security and protection. He had been getting used to it slowly, first during the four months of his self-imposed exile in Japan after having been given the test for Auror Leader against his will, then more strongly in the two days or so that had passed since he made the decision to accept the position. Even so, he found that he was far from completely used to the idea.

Thinking about taking a quick shower to get it out of the way before doing anything else, he walked out of the room and down the hall to find the bathroom door closed. His newly keen hearing wasn't necessary to hear the sound of water coming from the shower. He shrugged, realizing that there were also disadvantages to having asked Ron and Hermione to continue staying there as they had while he was in Japan. Still in his nightclothes, he headed down the stairs.

"Good morning, Harry," said Hermione cheerfully as he walked into the kitchen. "The Prophet's on the table, if you want to look at it." She resumed her breakfast preparations, putting a frying pan with six strips of bacon on the stove.

A quick glance at the front page told Harry why Hermione had added the 'if' to her comment. The headline read, "Potter Becomes Auror Leader, Defeats Dementors," with a moving picture of Harry speaking to the crowd. He sighed.

"I know what you're thinking, it's 'I didn't do it all by myself,'" said Hermione sympathetically, and indeed, he had been thinking almost those very words. "It's just for space reasons. If they say that, and then add 'with help of friends,' it doesn't fit right. Don't worry, the article makes it clear that we all did it. Of course, it also makes it clear that it was only because you found that spell. So, the headline isn't that far from the truth."

"If you say so," responded Harry absently as he started to read the article. A few seconds later, he looked around, then looked up at Hermione cooking, and found that he had a feeling of déjà vu. "You know, I just realized... the last time I was sitting here reading the Prophet while someone else cooked... it was Kingsley. He made breakfast for me after I woke up, when I slept the whole day after Voldemort died."

Surprised, she turned her head to look at him. "Really? I didn't know that. Why did he do that?"

"Partly as a joke, he said, but mainly because he wanted to talk to me. He was hoping I'd, you know, make the rounds, get out in public, let people praise me, that kind of thing."

She appeared amused. "I'd say he was spectacularly unsuccessful."

He chuckled. "You could say that. Now, I can see that he had a point; it would have helped. But as you know, I just wasn't in any mood."

She looked at him inquiringly. "But now you are? Is it just because of the time in Japan, you were able to... I don't know, decompress? Get rid of all the stress?"

He shook his head. "Maybe partly, but it was mainly because of those visions I had, when I did that... quest, I guess, after I left Japan. I had died, more or less, and it was tough for me to just suddenly get on with my life, because—"

"Because you had said goodbye to everyone and everything," she finished. "You know, I actually thought of that, while you were over there."

"Well, it was better that I figured it out myself, as it turns out," said Harry. "I was able to accept it better, and now I feel like I can just get on with things." Except Ginny, he added to himself with a pang of regret. She hadn't felt able to wait for him while he worked things out. She had moved on, now in a relationship with Neville. He couldn't blame her, since he'd broken up with her and not made any move to get back together since defeating Voldemort, but he supposed he would always wonder what might have been.

"So, you're really ready to be Auror Leader?" she asked him, concerned.

He nodded. "Yes, I think so. Maybe it's not what I would have chosen, but my life seems to run me, not the other way around. Both the time in Japan and the visions sort of let me know that there are bigger things than what I want. And, you know, as long as I have this saving-people thing, why not use it?"

She turned her head and gave him a sharp glance. "Was that a criticism?"

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “No,” he said reflexively, before thinking about the question. After doing so, he added, “I mean, I don’t see what’s wrong with saving people, but I did it in Japan too, so maybe you’re right.”

Turning back to her food preparation, she sighed. “Well, I actually felt a little bad for saying that, after what happened, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it, of course. I... I think I was just a little panicked at that time, thinking that you were going to go run off and get yourself killed.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” he muttered, turning his attention back to the Prophet, falling silent as he read. Hermione said nothing more as she beat eggs and took dishes down from cupboards.

Several minutes later, having reached the opinion page, Harry let out an exasperated grunt when he saw the headline of the second editorial: “Harry Potter: The Next Merlin?” He answered Hermione’s inquiring glance by showing her the headline. She chuckled. “Yes, I knew you’d like that. I grant you, it is a bit silly. But you have done quite a lot, especially for your age—”

“None of which I could have done without you,” he pointed out.

“Yes, thank you, but you see my point. It might not seem as strange to people who don’t know you. To them, you might seem larger than life.”

“Especially if they believe what they read in the Prophet,” he said with mild annoyance.

“Why don’t you just not read it, then?”

“I’d like to, but I really should know what’s being said about me. Before, I didn’t care—okay, well, I still don’t care, but if I’m going to be Auror Leader, I have to at least pay attention to it. People will be expecting me to know what’s in the Prophet. I mean, when I go out today, I’d guess a lot of people will be talking about the Merlin thing. Maybe making jokes, but who knows, some might take it seriously. I’ll

look stupid if I don't know about it. Or people might ask about Umbridge, that sort of thing. I have to know what's going on."

She gave him a surprised glance. "What about Umbridge?"

"Oh, sorry, I forgot I hadn't told you. When I visited St. Mungo's yesterday, after the dementor victims woke up, I had a quick chat with her. Like this," he added, whispering the last two words just loudly enough for her to hear. "I told her that if she didn't resign as Undersecretary, she would very likely end up in Azkaban."

Hermione gaped. "Harry! Should you really be doing things like that?"

A grinning Ron, clad in a blue bathrobe with a towel around his shoulders, walked into the kitchen. "I think what Hermione means to say is, all right! Way to go, Harry!" He slapped Harry on the back as he walked behind Harry's chair, taking his seat at the end of the table.

"That is not what I—"

"You and I saw what she did," cut in Harry with unusual earnestness. "That would, should, put her in Azkaban right there. And that was so far from all of it..."

She sighed, the wind taken out of her sails. "Look, obviously, I wouldn't argue with you about that. But what I mean is that as Auror Leader, you now have huge power, maybe more power than the Minister. He has to worry about his political situation. Your power is yours for life, unreviewable, as long as you want it. But one thing that history shows is that the more power you have, the more careful you have to be about using it. It's easy for people to get carried away, when nobody can stop them from doing what they want."

Ron shrugged. "I reckon he won't, not with you around, anyway."

She looked at him sourly. "It should be because he—"

"I know, I know," Harry interrupted her again. "Don't worry, it isn't something I plan to make a habit of. So, what are you guys doing today?"

“Well, I was going to lounge around,” allowed Ron, “but Hermione pointed out yesterday that if we’re going to become Aurors, it would be a good thing to get a head start on it, do some studying up on Auror history, techniques, things like that.” To Harry’s raised eyebrows, Ron responded, “Yes, I know, I was never big on studying, neither were you. But we’re adults now, and this is life, not school, so it kind of matters more now. And being an Auror is a big deal. I can only imagine how big it is for you, being Auror Leader. So, how about you?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I see what you mean. Me too, of course. There’s a ton of things I need to read, to learn. And the—” Surprised, he found that he couldn’t continue his sentence, as though there were an obstacle between his brain and his mouth. “The...” He tried again, and again failed to speak.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” asked Hermione.

“I don’t know... there’s something I want to mention, to do with being Auror Leader. It’s in a secret part of Auror...” Again, the obstacle stopped him. Harry exhaled in frustration.

“Is it a Forgetfulness Charm?” asked Ron.

Harry shook his head. “I remember fine, I just can’t say the damn words.”

“There’s probably a reason for that, Harry,” said Hermione earnestly. “You said the word ‘secret,’ and there are probably some things about being Auror Leader that are secret, that you’re not supposed to talk about with anyone. Maybe it’s for the best that you can’t say anything about it.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, maybe, but there are things I might want to talk about sometimes, and it’ll sound stupid if I say that somebody told me something, and you say who, and I can’t answer you. Maybe it’s something I can’t talk about with them, or they wouldn’t understand.”

“Who are ‘they?’” asked Ron.

“Obviously, that’s what Harry’s not supposed to say,” said Hermione. “We know that being Auror Leader confers certain abilities, like being able to Apparate anywhere. It must impose some restrictions as well.”

Sudden inspiration struck Harry. “Like Albus.” They frowned, not understanding. “P—p—“

“Portrait!” blurted out Hermione. “But you said they, them—“

“You can talk to the portraits of former Auror Leaders!” said Ron excitedly.

“I can talk to the portraits of former Auror Leaders,” agreed Harry, who was suddenly confused, then annoyed. “Sure, now they let me say it.”

“Because now we know,” said Hermione. “It must be that you can talk about it with people who already know, so we’re okay now.”

“Well, I’m glad that’s over with,” muttered Harry. “That was annoying. I won’t be trying that with anyone else, believe me. But yes, I’ve talked with them a bit already. It’s very interesting, and I think they’re going to be a big help.”

“I’d imagine so,” agreed Ron. “That must be cool. But why is that so super-secret? Portraits are common enough.”

Harry shrugged. As Hermione started to put the food on the plates, she answered, “I’d guess—Ron, would you get the orange juice out of the refrigerator?—that they want the secrecy as a matter of course, they don’t want anyone knowing anything that’s not necessary. I must say, though, I disagree with that. Secrecy for a good reason is one thing, but for its own sake, we need to be careful of that. Combine secrecy with power, which you now have, and history is full of examples of what happens when you go down that road.”

Ron poured three glasses of orange juice, then sent the container back into the refrigerator by sending it floating across the room as the refrigerator door opened to accept it. “I wish I could take you in there

with me,” grumbled Harry as he accepted a glass from Ron. “They’re giving me a hard time for not knowing much of the history of the past eighty years, which they say they need to know to be able to advise not only me, but future Auror Leaders. I understand that, it’s just annoying. It’s not like I don’t have enough to do.”

“You really should know it, just for your own sake,” said Ron solemnly. To Harry and Hermione’s surprised expressions, he grinned. “Okay, I was just saying it so Hermione wouldn’t have to.”

“You’re so funny,” retorted Hermione disdainfully as Harry grinned. “But Harry, I’m just wondering, why couldn’t you take me to see them?”

“They’re in a room which only I can see the door of. I can walk into the room, but if you were there you’d never see the door, and you’d probably just walk into the wall. No, I’m going to have to do it myself, I’m afraid.”

The three fell silent as they ate, Harry reading more of the paper before handing it over to Ron. “Don’t worry, I’ve already seen the Merlin thing,” Ron assured him. “I bet it becomes Malfoy’s new nickname for you.”

Harry grunted. “I’d almost be surprised if it wasn’t.”

“So, do you think we’ll be seeing more of him?” wondered Ron. “No chance he’ll just fade into the woodwork, never to be heard from again?”

“That doesn’t sound like Malfoy, does it?” pointed out Hermione. Ron nodded unhappily.

“No, it’s hard to see that happening,” agreed Harry. “With his personality and his family’s money, he’ll be up to something. Not necessarily evil, mind you, probably more like something to get influence and power. Don’t know what that would be, but I’m sure he’ll figure something out.”

After a pause for another bite of food, Ron continued, "So, you never did say what you were going to do today."

"Oh, yeah. Let's see... take a tour of Diagon Alley, visit the portraits—I'll probably be doing that every day for a while—and I'm spending three hours with someone from Witch Weekly."

"Not Skeeter," Hermione put in adamantly.

"No," Harry agreed. "Pinter."

Her expression softened. "I know why you chose him, of course. It's very nice of you."

"Well, he deserves it," said Harry. "He did the right thing, and he didn't have to. That reminds me, is there anything new about your parents?"

A sadness settled over Hermione's face, one she wasn't completely successful in concealing. "That may take a while. I'm trying not to have any expectations."

Ron gave Harry a look that warned him to stay away from that topic. Harry silently castigated himself for having carelessly brought up a painful topic for Hermione. He realized that even though Hermione had done it to save her parents' lives, their anger at her manipulation of their memories might indeed take a very long time to fade.

"So," said Ron in an obvious attempt to change the subject, "have you given any more thought about who to take for the accelerated Auror training?"

"A little bit, last night," said Harry. "But it's more a matter of figuring out which, if any, DA members not to take. I don't think I'd take anyone who wasn't in it, and who didn't fight at the Hogwarts battle. Pretty much everyone in the DA showed that they were ready to step up and fight when the time came, and that's who we need as Aurors. So, who wouldn't I take... Dennis, of course, he's way too young. Cho, she's obviously not going to be an Auror—"

“Do you know that for sure?” asked Hermione.

Surprised, Harry shook his head. “But she’s on the track for Healer training. She’s not going to want to become an Auror.”

“She’s got a point, you should at least check,” suggested Ron. “If most of us are joining, unless you have a really good reason, you should talk to everyone, see how they feel about it.”

“Even Lavender?”

Ron’s face registered his disapproval. “Yes, even her,” said Hermione. “Believe me, I don’t think of her as any kind of threat. Now, I’m not sure how good an Auror she’d be, since she wasn’t one of the best of the DA. But ultimately, that’ll be your decision. If you don’t take her, don’t not take her for the reason you mentioned.”

Pausing for a second to untangle the double negative, Harry nodded. Another thing to think about, he thought.

* * * * *

Fortunately, as Auror Leader, Harry had more time than he knew what to do with, a virtual infinity if he wanted to take it. The secret room in which the Auror Leader portraits hung—he was beginning to think of it as the Auror Leader’s sanctuary, since no one else could enter—operated by highly unusual magical rules, one of which was that while one was in the room, time in the outside world did not move, and one did not age or have other bodily needs or problems. He could contemplate his situation for hours or days if he wished.

He Apparated to the room in which he had taken the Auror Leader test and walked through the shimmering door, which seemed to vanish as he did. He sat down in front of the group of portraits on the wall, fifteen in all, five across and three down. “Good morning, gentlemen. How are you doing?”

The one in the lower left frame spoke. “Leader Potter, you would do well to dispense with pleasantries, customary as they may be for you. First of all, as we have told you, time does not move for us when you

are not here. So while you have no doubt slept, as you addressed us with a morning greeting, as far as we are concerned no time has passed since you were last here. But in any case, we have no need for greetings or pleasantries. You should simply sit and state your business.”

“Well, okay,” agreed Harry, slightly put off. “But it just seems really unfriendly.”

“Fear not, you will get to know us, and we you, extremely well over the years,” replied one in the second row. “And with close acquaintance comes familiarity, but one genuine, not artificially created.”

“If you say so,” agreed Harry. “So, you said last time there were a lot of things you wanted to be filled in on, and I told you about my life, most of it. I think I stopped at the point where I def—I mean, when Voldemort died.”

“You did indeed defeat him,” said the one in the lower right. “You need not be overly modest about it.”

“But all I did was use the Expelliarmus spell,” responded Harry.

“You defeated him with your mind, not your wand. You understood things that he did not. As Auror Leader, you will be in similar situations. Being able to best your adversary with your wand is quite important; besting him with your mind is crucial.” Other portraits nodded approvingly.

“Well, anyway... is there anything you want me to tell you now?”

“History.”

“Um... sorry, I haven’t done anything about that yet. I need to go to the bookstore. I’ll do that later this morning.”

“Be sure,” said the portrait on the upper right, “to purchase the appropriate tomes. Twentieth century wizarding world history, the British Isles, and similar ones regarding Muggle history. When we

have thoroughly perused those, we shall know from whence to proceed.”

Harry was about to comment on the Leader’s odd English, then remembered that the man had lived in the twelfth century, when the language was quite different. He supposed all the portraits updated their English based on the patterns of the current Leader, or else they wouldn’t be well understood. “Okay, I’ll get those. Well, I’ll continue where I left off, with my life.”

He shifted in his chair, getting comfortable. “So, after I defeated Voldemort, I slept for almost a whole day. When I woke up, I felt... strange. Like I didn’t want to do anything, just be left alone. Except for Ron and Hermione, I didn’t feel any real connection to anyone or anything.”

“The non-physical death,” said the Leader in the middle of the grid sagely. “You needed time to recover, to realize in your heart and mind that you were truly among the living.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “It took me several months to figure that out. How did you know, just like that?”

“It happened to me, in my forty-first year, before I became Leader. It has happened to most of us to some extent. It happened to affect me more strongly. It took me longer than you to determine the cause.”

“Well, I had help. Anyway, the next time I left my home was two days later, for Fred’s funeral. After the service, we were attacked by dementors, and there were attacks all over England.” Harry spent the next while explaining Kingsley’s refusal to allow the dementors back into Azkaban.

“We have all had to make such decisions,” said the twelfth Leader. “Some will always choose the practical path, some the moral path. Do continue.”

“Well, around the same time as this was going on, the goblins got very aggressive. They were angry about our breaking into the vault, and insisted that the Ministry reimburse them for the damage.

Kingsley wouldn't talk to them, and soon they started a massive slowdown of services at Gringotts. Then they tried to kidnap me with a Portkey paper airplane, which Ron saved me from. Things got even more tense, and finally, they made another kidnap attempt that succeeded." Harry paused in the story to relate the details of his confinement.

"So, Kingsley and other Aurors rescued me. I was massively sleep-deprived, kind of out of my mind. As far as I knew, when I woke up after a long sleep, I was in St. Mungo's. My parents were there, talking to me—"

"One moment," a Leader interrupted. "You said your parents died when you were a baby. Was this some sort of hallucination?"

"No. I didn't know it, but Kingsley had put me in the Auror Leader test, without my knowledge or permission."

To Harry's mild shock, pandemonium erupted among the portraits. For a few seconds, all seemed to be speaking at the same time. "Shocking!" "Appalling!" "...never heard of such a thing!" "Unbelievable!"

As the din started to die down, the twelfth Leader asked, "Are you absolutely certain of this? No Memory Charms, no other subtle form of consent?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm certain. He admitted much later that he didn't ask me to take it because he was sure I'd say no."

This caused more reactions, though a little less vehement than the original ones. "What could have possessed him to do such a thing?" asked a Leader incredulously.

"Some of the Aurors, maybe as many as a dozen, had been seriously compromised during the Voldemort time. He felt it was crucial to get rid of them, and no one but an Auror Leader could."

This was responded to with snorts of derision, rolled eyes, and more muttered comments. "This man ought to be keelhauled," spat one.

“—no business being a Minister—“

“—no respect for Auror tradition—“

“—utter lack of imagination, no leadership skills—“

Still surprised by the venom coming from the fifteen men, all of whom had been highly respected men, important national figures, Harry imagined that their reactions weren't for the same reasons he'd been furious when he'd discovered what Kingsley had done. “Um, look, I'm sure you're going to say this is obvious, but I'd like to know exactly why you're all so angry about what he did.”

The fourteenth Leader's tone was one of exasperation. “The reason, young man, is that—“

“‘Leader Potter,’ not ‘young man,’” interjected another. “Whether he sought it or not, he is now Leader, and deserves respect no less than you, or any of us.”

“We must be tolerant of whatever ignorance he seems to possess,” added the third Leader from his spot in the middle of the top row. “He did not ask for this.”

“You are both correct, of course. Forgive me, Leader Potter. I was carried away by emotion. As for your question, we are incensed by the lack of regard and respect for the position of Auror Leader shown by this Minister Shacklebolt. The position is a sacred trust, to be bestowed upon the one who believes he is fit for the task and wishes to serve society by taking on this awesome responsibility. Not as a mere means to an end, to solve a short-term problem. No man who had ever held the position would consider using it in such a way. No one should be given the test who does not wish it—no matter the circumstances—and no one so young should be allowed to take it.”

“Agreed,” said the fifteenth Leader, “but it only makes Leader Potter's accomplishment all the more impressive. I would not have thought it possible that one of eighteen years could pass.”

"I think all will agree," said the ninth, "that we must re-evaluate our role in the face of this stunning news."

"Indeed," agreed the fourteenth, who was seconded by others. "Leader Potter, would you like to speculate on the average age upon which the fifteen of us ascended to the position you now hold?"

"Um... thirty?"

"Forty-one. Anyone under thirty who wishes to take it is generally advised to wait. Prior to you, I was the youngest, at thirty-two. This is partly to allow one's skills to develop, but more to emphasize maturity and life experience. Experience is the best teacher, and while you have clearly been tested many times in your young life, being Leader will test you in ways you cannot be prepared for.

"In addition, the power inherent in the position can be a temptation, at times difficult even for the most prudent and even-tempered man to resist using inappropriately. The younger one is, the more one may lack the temperament to use the power with great restraint." Harry took some time to explain what he had done with Umbridge. "This is a good example," said the Leader. "What you did is defensible along the lines of justice as well as political convenience. However, I would have advised against it, due to the lack of extreme necessity; she could have been prosecuted through normal channels if that was desired. The more sparingly your power is used, the more impact it will have when you use it."

The third Leader spoke. "I disagree. I would have supported his action, only because due to his young age, politicians might have thought they could intimidate Leader Potter. What he did will send a powerful message, that he is not to be trifled with."

"A reasonable argument," agreed the fourteenth Leader. "In any case... Leader Potter, what I am about to say is very important. The Auror Leader is the most important and powerful person in the country, and the most high-profile. There are many things about life that at your age, you cannot yet know. The most important one, arguably, is not magical skill or bravery, but understanding people. To know how a man feels, why he does as he does, what his personal

demons are. To understand his heart and mind by looking into his eyes. One of your Leader-specific abilities is to know when a person is lying, for example, but it is hardly necessary, and Veritaserum is a crude instrument. Experience will tell you what you need to know.

“This ability is especially important when dealing with politicians, powerful merchants, shady dealers, and others who constitute the fulcrums of power in our society. There may, for example, be a man who is teetering on the edge between respectability and villainy, a man who you can influence. If he becomes a villain, you may capture and imprison him, but it is far more desirable to nudge him along the right path. The skills, the experience of which I speak, you do not now know. Experience will teach you, and we will assist you. Through no fault of your own, you begin your journey as Leader at a decided disadvantage. It is this we hope to mitigate.”

“Um, okay.” Harry wasn’t quite sure what he should say.

“Now, then,” said the third Leader. “Do continue your account of the recent past, from the point at which the Minister took this infamous and unsupportable action.”

As Harry began his account of his trip to Japan and his experiences there, he wondered exactly how much there was for him to learn. The task before him, always daunting, now seemed even more so. But at least he would have help.

* * * * *

Another of Harry’s ‘Leader-specific abilities’ was the ability to Apparate to anywhere he wished, disregarding any normal magical barriers. He had used that ability to barge in on Headmistress McGonagall a few days before, but he knew it would be rude to do it as a matter of routine. He would, however, dispense with the waiting that appearing outside the gate would entail.

Apparating twenty meters from the castle, within the radius usually not permitted by Apparition, he looked around and saw that the gate was gone, destroyed in the battle four months ago. Hogwarts was still as damaged as it had been at that time, as repairs had been delayed

due to the dementor problem. A glance around showed a group of first years on brooms about fifty meters away; he suddenly wondered if Neville still had that Remembrall. He headed toward the castle.

The time being 10:20 a.m., he imagined that most students would be in classes. He glanced into the Great Hall, which was empty. He walked down a hallway, headed for the teachers' lounge, reflecting that it had been a year and four months since he had last done so. Considering the great changes that had occurred since then, it was very hard not to have a strong feeling of nostalgia for the place. He wondered if everyone who came back after an absence felt the same way.

He opened the door and saw one very small figure, seated on a high chair at a table, whose back was to Harry. It wasn't necessary to see his face to know who it was. "Professor Flitwick?"

Flitwick whirled around in surprise. "Mr. Potter!" He bounded down from the chair to the floor and walked over to reach up and shake Harry's hand. "I'm sorry, I should say, Leader Potter. What brings you here?"

Harry was tempted to say that Flitwick need not use the title, but the other Leaders had warned him not to discourage the use of the title, as it was important for people not to forget his role, and the respect it commanded. "It's hard for me to get used to as well, actually. I'm here to see Professor McGonagall, but I wanted to thank you for your help getting rid of the dementors."

"You saw me there?" asked Flitwick in surprise, as they left the room.

"I saw your Patronus," admitted Harry, a little sheepishly.

"Ah, yes. Well, a whale is a unique Patronus. I always say that fate had quite a sense of humor with that one. Let me walk you to the gargoyles. I should tell you, although others no doubt will, that the students who participated in the dementors' defeat were well and truly heralded upon their return, and asked again and again to tell the story of what happened, including your comments. They are much envied; they, and I, were a part of history."

“Well, I appreciated everyone’s help. We got a lot of Patronuses, and that made all the difference.”

Flitwick approached the gargoyles. “Normalcy!” he said loudly, and the gargoyles gestured them to pass.

“Good password,” remarked Harry.

“She thought so,” said Flitwick. “You go on ahead, and please, come back any time.” Flitwick retreated the way he had come, and Harry walked up the steps to the office he still associated with Dumbledore. He knocked, and the door opened to reveal McGonagall at her desk. “Ah, Leader Potter,” she said, standing as she did so. Harry hoped she didn’t feel she had to stand when he appeared. “Please, have a seat. I gather that today, you are in no hurry.”

Harry grinned at her reference to his having Apparated in front of her desk a few days before. “No, I’m not. So, how’s the normalcy going?”

She grunted. “It was more a wish than anything else. Repairs are supposed to begin next week. I have an unfortunate feeling, however, that whatever the purpose of your visit, it will not increase the chances of normalcy.”

“I don’t suppose so,” he agreed. “Not too badly, I hope. I’m going to be recruiting Aurors, and I’m going to start with DA members. There’s a few of them who are seventh years, and for them, I’d like your permission for me to take them out of the school or talk to them anytime, at my discretion.”

“Oh, of course,” she replied with wry sarcasm, her tone indicating that while she was far from pleased, she didn’t feel that she could refuse his request. “And will there be anything else?”

“Yes. And you’re not going to like this, but—“

“Professor Longbottom,” she said, with a mild wince.

“Yes. I am sorry about that, but I’m going to have too few Aurors as it is, and I’ll need every last good one I can get.”

She sighed. “I knew this was coming, of course, and annoying as it is, I cannot disagree with you. The students will not be happy, however, as he is quite popular, and better than any Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor we have had in recent memory.”

Not wanting to appear disrespectful of Neville, Harry held back the automatic response of ‘that’s not saying much.’ “I’m not surprised.”

“Who have you settled on, so far?”

“For now, just Ron, Hermione, and Neville. I’m favorably inclined towards most everyone, but I want to talk to them first.”

“Not Mr. Creevey, I hope.”

“No. He’s not back from St. Mungo’s, is he?”

“He is expected in a few days, and I imagine that he will have quite a story to tell.” Harry nodded, chatted with her for a little while, then left. He was very conscious of the fact that now, his time was a very precious resource indeed.

He did, however, decide to spend some of that precious time chatting with Professor Slughorn, who he ran into on his way out of the castle. While serving to remind him of just how precious that time was, the twenty-minute conversation also reinforced to Harry that there would from now on be many people, like Slughorn, who would talk to Harry for a half hour for no other reason than to be able to say to friends later, ‘I talked to the Auror Leader for a half hour today.’ For now, he would not assume that this was every person’s intent, but he knew he had to keep this in mind, and not to let his time be wasted.

Let’s look at it from a Malfoy point of view, Harry thought sardonically. Malfoy had said in their Veritaserum conversation that you dealt with those people whom you could use, and didn’t bother with others. Harry had no personal feelings for Slughorn, other than respect for

being on the right side in the final battle. Is there anything he can do for me that I can't do for myself? Not for introductions; I can meet whoever I want, on my own. Information? Maybe. He might know who knows something I want to know, and no doubt he 'collects' information as well as people. He might not be extremely useful, but it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to keep communication open with him.

Harry had never been the type of person to 'use' others in this way, and he found he didn't care for it. He preferred to talk to who he wanted to, and not talk to those he didn't. He'd always found people like Slughorn unappealing, using others as means of advancement and self-promotion. He recalled that Dumbledore had used Slughorn, but at least that had been for a very good reason. Does that make it all right? Harry wasn't sure, but he knew that regardless, he would have to get used to it. It was for the good of society, not his own good, and that was important.

Harry Apparated to Diagon Alley, having determined that while walking around in public had never been one of his favorite things to do, he should make a habit of making the rounds once or twice a day; partly to become a familiar face and so avoid being accosted regularly, and partly to keep tabs on things. Security was still an issue, as almost all of the 41 Aurors had died less than two weeks ago. Percy Weasley was still in charge of a temporary security-enhancing group of Ministry workers, but that was a far cry from having a full staff of well-trained Aurors on call. People didn't feel safe, but Harry had found in his walk the day before that many felt safer with him there. He didn't know if that was because of his possession of the Elder Wand or just the fact that he was now Auror Leader, but whatever the reason, he would do what he could.

Following through on the request of the Auror Leader portraits, Harry stopped into Flourish & Blotts to pick up the history books the Leaders had asked him to get. Upon seeing Harry, a worker suddenly walked briskly over to the stairs leading to the offices on the second floor. Less than a minute later, Flourish walked down the stairs and greeted Harry heartily. It was apparent, and somewhat embarrassing, to Harry that Flourish had instructed the staff to summon him whenever Harry entered the shop so that he could help Harry

personally. Harry wished he wouldn't, as he didn't want to cause a fuss, but realized it was something he couldn't do much about.

People stopped to talk to him, mostly to congratulate him on becoming Auror Leader and to express their confidence that he would do an excellent job. Harry was hardly convinced of this himself, but it was good to have their support.

As he walked, he heard a female shout of "Harry!" down an alley to his right. He looked over and saw Cho about twenty feet away, hurrying up to catch him, pulling a young man whose hand she was holding.

"Cho!" he responded, surprised. "How are you doing?" He had long since lost the attraction he'd had to her, but it was impossible not to be struck by how pretty she was.

"I'm good! It's too bad I didn't get much of a chance to talk to you yesterday."

"Well, I appreciated you being there. It took all of us to do it."

"Oh, it was wonderful! It was a part of history, I'll always remember it." The man with Cho looked a few years older than her. He was six feet tall with short brown hair and thick eyebrows, and didn't look at all happy. Seeming to finally realize that she wasn't alone, she added, "Harry, this is Rick Fallows. He was Ravenclaw, class of '94."

About five years ago, thought Harry, though he didn't pause to do the math. "Nice to meet you," he said politely, extending his hand. Fallows gave what Harry felt was a wary and quick shake. Turning to Cho, Harry said, "Cho, can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

Before Cho could answer, her companion did. "About what?"

The man's tone was somewhat aggressive, and only then did it dawn on Harry that Fallows must have known about his and Cho's prior relationship, and was... jealous? Strange as it was to Harry, it had to be true.

Harry went silent, not knowing what to say. He wanted to sound Cho out about the idea of becoming an Auror, if only as a courtesy, but he didn't plan to discuss that around anyone else. He was tempted to say 'none of your business,' but refrained, knowing it was too rude. As Auror Leader, his every action was public, or at least, could be. He settled for gazing at Fallows for a few seconds, then turning back to Cho with an inquiring look, signaling that he intended to ignore Fallows' question.

"Uh, yeah, sure," replied Cho, a little discomfited.

"Listen, Cho, it was your idea to go shopping together—"

"Rick, he's the Auror Leader. If he wants to talk to me, I'm going to talk to him." It had occurred to Harry to suggest that they meet later, but that would involve appointments and scheduling, and he had almost two dozen people to meet for similar reasons. Unless Cho insisted, he wasn't going to put it off for the sake of this man's ego. "How long will it take?" she asked Harry.

He shrugged. "Five minutes, maybe ten. I'm not sure."

She looked up at Rick, who was almost a head taller than her. "Would you get a table and wait for me at Florean Fortescue's?" She took his hand in hers as she made the request. He gave her a short nod, then a hard look at Harry. "Where will you be?"

Annoyed, Harry responded, "Someplace we can talk." He took Cho by the arm, touched his wand, and Disapparated. They were suddenly in a field, with some trees spread out not too far away. She looked around for a few seconds. "This is... not far from—oh, there it is." She pointed at the Hogwarts castle about a mile in the distance.

"I just wanted to be able to talk privately," said Harry.

She nodded. "Sorry about that. I wouldn't have thought he'd react like that. Maybe it was just the suddenness."

"You did tell him that you and I are way in the past, right?"

She sighed. "Of course, he knows that. But come on, Harry, you must be able to guess that any man in his position would wonder if, now that you're not only a hero but the Auror Leader, he'd wonder if I'd start to fancy you again."

"I wouldn't have guessed, to be honest, but I hadn't really thought about it," Harry admitted. "Look, the reason I wanted to talk to you is that with all the Aurors having died a few weeks ago, I'm going to have to recruit new ones."

She nodded. "The Prophet had an article about it, they were speculating on what you would do. You want to know if I know anyone who would be good?"

"Well, first thing, I wanted to know how you'd feel about being one." Her eyebrows went high. "I mean, I know you're in the program to be a Healer, so I didn't assume you would. But I at least wanted to see how you felt about it."

She smiled the smile that had made his heart thump dozens of times in the past. "I'm flattered that you ask, Harry. But no, I wouldn't think that would be for me. I've spent a long time preparing to be a Healer, and it really is something I'd like to do. But I am curious... if I said yes, you'd take me?"

"I'd be favorably inclined," he clarified. "You're good with a wand, and I have no reason to think you wouldn't be a good Auror." It suddenly occurred to him that his comment could be interpreted as damning with faint praise, but he knew that he should be honest whenever possible. "It would depend more on how much you wanted to be one. The more you wanted to be one, and the harder you'd work to be a good one, the more likely it is that I'd want you."

"That makes sense," she agreed, looking around at the scenery. It was really a beautiful day, which he hadn't noticed it while in Diagon Alley. "No, it sounds really interesting, and thanks so much for asking, but I just don't think it would be right for me."

He nodded. "That's okay. I thought you might say that." After a short pause, he said, "Well, I should let you get back. But I would like to

ask that you not tell anyone what I talked to you about. I don't want it to get around that I'm talking to DA people, since I won't be having this conversation with every last one."

"Well, I'll just tell Rick that you tried to get me back, and I pushed you away," she responded with a teasing smile.

He grinned, but understood that she was pointing out that Rick would certainly press her for details. "You could just tell him that I asked you to keep it quiet," he suggested. "I mean, I am the Auror Leader, so it shouldn't be so strange that I wouldn't want details of my conversations spread around, especially if I went to the trouble of making them private."

She gently shook her head. "You must not have had much experience at being jealous. As far as he's concerned, you and I are having sex right this very minute," she added with a mischievous grin.

Harry blushed, wondering if Cho was deliberately flirting with him. "In that case, you should definitely get back. But thanks for talking to me."

"Any time, Harry. See you." With a last smile, she Disapparated.

He remained for a minute, wondering about women. With Ginny now out of reach, he had no immediate girlfriend prospects. Not that he needed them—he was more than busy enough—but he wondered how he would meet whoever his future wife ended up being. He knew he would have no trouble attracting women, but how would he know whether a woman was interested in him because of his basic character, or because he was a 'hero' and Auror Leader? He now had the ability to spot lies, so he supposed he could always find out, but checking your girlfriend for lies seemed like a depressing prospect. He wondered how many women there were who could be relied on not to lie.

* * * * *

Running into a few people as he had Cho, and owling the rest, Harry met with most of the DA members over the next few days. Many had

at least some interest in becoming Aurors, while a few, like Ginny, requested time to think it over. In the meantime, he spent a lot more time with the Auror Leader portraits learning about being both an Auror and the Auror Leader. He also spent time with Hestia, the only remaining real Auror, learning about the small but important details about how Aurors operated in the present day, as the portraits only knew about the distant past. He also, with Hermione's help, made preparations for the journey ahead.

A week later, things were largely ready to go; it only remained to finalize the arrangements with those who would be going. And, of course, to let them know that they would be going. He had deliberately waited as long as possible to tell them, as he wanted word not to get out to the public. He sent owls to the ones chosen, asking them to meet him at the Ministry, from where he escorted them by Portkey to the Park, the unofficial name for the ten-acre complex that comprised Auror Headquarters. They assembled in the lounge in which Aurors had relaxed in their breaks or free time; there were more than enough sofas and comfortable chairs for everyone. He could have chosen a conference room, but had decided he wanted the meeting to be less formal than sitting around a large conference table would have felt.

Harry stood near one of the corners of the room, where he could see everyone. "So, this is everyone?" asked Lee Jordan, sitting on a sofa next to George Weasley. "There were almost thirty people in the DA, and this is about half that. The rest didn't want to do it?"

Harry had thought about what he would say, figuring he might be asked this question. "The others aren't here for various reasons, and I want to keep those private conversations private. As I would like this meeting kept private. I've been doing some research on Aurors, talking to Kingsley and Hestia, and some former Aurors. And one thing I've learned is that there's a long tradition of confidentiality among Aurors, and it's there for a good reason. Aurors' discussions, debates, orders, even training techniques, shouldn't be discussed with non-Aurors. The more the bad guys know about how we do things, the less effective we can be. So, the last thing I want is to read about this meeting in tomorrow's Prophet. This is mentioned in something called the Code, which is a small book, or pamphlet,

maybe about fifty pages. It's not rules, exactly, but it lays out the behavior that's expected of an Auror. You'll all be reading it in the near future." With a small grin, he added, "except for Hermione; she'll be memorizing it."

This got chuckles from Ron and some others. "Well, that's only if we'll be tested on it," suggested George.

"Well, you will, in a way," said Harry to a surprised George. "Not a written test, of course. The Code mentions this, that there are what are called character tests. For example, just a simple one... you may be walking along one day and see a man's coinpurse—big, let's say, full of Galleons—fall from his bag, or his pocket. No one else is around, and he didn't see it, he keeps on walking. Some people would pick it up and keep it, though we'd hope most people would let him know about it. You, of course, should let him know. Now, it may be that he's really a random man, who dropped a coinpurse. Or, it may be someone I asked to do that, on purpose, to see what you would do. You won't know, and it shouldn't matter, whether it's a test or not. If you keep it, that means you're probably not the sort of person we want as an Auror."

"Would that person then be fired?" asked Ernie McMillan.

"Not just like that," replied Harry. "But I would talk to that Auror, and ask why he or she did that. Most tests are more complex than that, and the Auror may have made a mistake in understanding the situation, or something like that, rather than just a bad moral choice. It really depends on the situation. But if I end up convinced that they can't be trusted to be an Auror, then yes, they'd be fired."

"Now, before I get on to the main part of what I want to talk about, I want to say a few things. First, I want to thank all of you for agreeing to do this. The fact that you're here means I asked if you would be interested in becoming an Auror, you said yes, and I decided that you were sincere in your desire, and doing it for the right reasons. As Lee noticed, not every DA member is here. A few I didn't ask, thinking they wouldn't be suitable for one reason or another. A few I did ask, and they said no. And a few I asked, they said yes or maybe, and I ended up deciding that they didn't want to strongly enough for me to

invite them here today. You are the ones that I felt confident would end up as good Aurors if you work hard and put your maximum effort into it.

“Secondly, this is an unusual situation, rushed along by an emergency. Almost all of the Aurors died a few weeks ago, as we all know. So, you’re not being recruited according to the usual methods. Paper credentials, like N.E.W.T.s, are usually required, and there’s a training period where the new Auror isn’t on active duty, usually three years. That’s a luxury we don’t have, so you’ll be on duty to some extent while training. There won’t be different standards for you; the same performance will be required of you as any other Auror. But in recognition of the fact that I’m asking this as a favor of you... normally, once you join as an Auror, you stay until retirement. I hope that all of you will stay. But we’ll be continuously recruiting over the next few years until our numbers are good enough, and once they are, I’m not going to object if some of you decide this isn’t what you want to do with your life. Now... any questions so far?”

After a few seconds, Justin Finch-Fletchley raised his hand. “Yes, why is it only DA people so far? You are going to recruit from outside the DA at some point, right? So, why not wait for this to start until you have everyone you’re going to have?”

“Good question,” answered Harry. “And the answer is the main thing I wanted to tell you about today; it has to do with your training. I said to some of you privately that you’d be joining an accelerated training program. What I didn’t tell you was the form of that program. We’re going to go back in time.”

Dumbfounded stares met this statement. “Why?” asked Justin incredulously.

Ernie jumped in before Harry could answer. “It gets us time to train,” he said, his tone suggesting that he was realizing it as he spoke the words. “England is relatively undefended every day there are no Aurors.”

“Yes, exactly,” agreed Harry. “Now, of course there are risks in time travel, risks that I’ve made a plan to minimize. We won’t be doing this

in England, for one thing. That would be extremely risky. There's an uninhabited island in the South Pacific that's mostly unknown, that has been used by Auror Leaders before. We're going to go there, taking whatever supplies we need for a one-year stay. Once on the island we'll use the last existing Time-Turner to go back one year, then spend that time training. We'll come back a day or so after we left, according to everyone else, anyway. You won't be perfectly trained Aurors, not in that time. But it'll be a good start, an important start. So, the main answer to Justin's question is that you'll get enough training to do some duties in the field while the rest of your training continues. Meanwhile, the next ten or fifteen I recruit will start training, at a more normal pace. That is, not a time-traveling pace. The reason the time traveling will involve you and not them is that I have more confidence in you. I've worked with you, I know you, and I don't want to take someone back a year and then after a month, realize that it's not going to work. I'm trusting you guys to hold down the fort while we get more trained."

Padma Patil raised her hand. "You said there are risks in time travel. What exactly are they?"

Harry had been briefed by the portraits on this topic; it had been discussed at length. "The main risk, the biggest risk, is that as a result of going back in time we cause something to happen that we know didn't happen the first time, or prevent something from happening that did happen. For example, someone goes back to six months ago and kills me before I have a chance to defeat Voldemort. What would happen? Nobody really knows, but it's thought that it would cause chaos, maybe even violent and cataclysmic physical events, like earthquakes, tidal waves. An old text I read says it happened once, a few thousand years ago, and that it was as if two realities fought against each other, and lots of weird stuff ended up happening. Two versions of the same person in some cases, while other people disappeared, some remembered one version of reality while others remembered another, some people went insane, stuff like that. Now, I don't know if this is true or not. I do know that the Time-Turner works, having used it before, and a few times it was a near miss for that kind of paradox. Since it shouldn't be possible to change history, but clearly it is, I wouldn't want to find out what would happen."

“So, why do it at all, if it’s so risky?” asked Padma.

“Well, I’ve gotten...” Harry paused, then explained, “First, I should say that there are some things about being Auror Leader that I can’t, or shouldn’t, talk about, even to other Aurors. There are... accounts, for example, from former Auror Leaders, pieces of information, artifacts, that sort of thing, which are set aside in a place that only the Auror Leader can access, set up by his predecessors. So, I’ll have resources that I might refer to, but really can’t talk about. The knowledge about this island is one of them; most people don’t know about it. Anyway, I mention that because I... am given to understand that this plan is very safe. The risks I mentioned are the general risks of time travel, not of this particular plan. Since we’ll be isolated from everyone during this time, unless something truly bizarre happened, there’s no way that any paradox could happen. On the other hand, getting a year of training all of a sudden will be very beneficial, and it could easily save lives. So, I’m comfortable with the risks, but I wanted to be sure that everyone knew what they were.”

“Who exactly is coming?” asked Neville. “Just the people in this room?”

“Us, and Kingsley and Hestia,” answered Harry. “It’s not exactly like I’ll be training you, though I will occasionally, depending on the situation. Kingsley and Hestia, as trained Aurors, will be teaching us a lot of what they know, and that includes me. I’m the first Auror Leader who wasn’t already an Auror, so there are still things I need to learn. But I should say that Kingsley’s being Minister won’t matter there; as far as authority goes, he’s just a former Auror. I’ll be in charge, and responsible for everything that happens. If he and I don’t agree on something, he’ll do what I say, and he only has the authority to give orders if I give him that authority. We’ve discussed this, and he understands it.

“Two other people will be coming. One hasn’t been decided yet, and I’ll be telling you... well, you’ll be seeing him or her when we go. The other is Luna. She won’t be training to be an Auror, but she’ll be coming anyway.”

This got a few surprised reactions. “Why?” asked Parvati.

Harry had been prepared for this question as well. “Her coming is necessary to avoid a paradox of the type I mentioned earlier. The details of that are personal, and I’ll leave it for her to talk about it or not, as she chooses. She will have responsibilities on the island, in the general category of ‘whatever needs to be done’ while we’re all training. Except for that, no one else is coming. Any other questions?”

George raised a hand. “Accommodations? Is there perhaps a five-star hotel on this island?”

A grin flashed across Harry’s face before disappearing. “Sorry, no. Tents, with expandable apparent space. They’ll be plenty comfortable, that’s no problem. As for sleeping arrangements, two to a room. Roommates are random, changing once a week.”

“Harry, I count only five women here, so there’d be an odd one,” said Hermione. “Is Luna included in that? Or Hestia?”

Harry shook his head. “Roommates are random, regardless of gender.”

This caused many raised eyebrows and surprised expressions. “What??” asked Ron incredulously; Harry could see that Ron was none too happy about the thought of another male sleeping anywhere near Hermione.

“This is part of the training,” Harry explained. “Aurors have to go out on missions, sometimes taking a few days. They might have to stay in close quarters, maybe in the same room, or out in the open. I’ll choose the best Aurors to do the job, and it won’t matter whether they’re male or female. Aurors have to conduct themselves professionally, including in situations like that. You could say it’s like practice for what may happen in the future. For example, imagine that you go somewhere on assignment, you stay in a hotel for a few days. You stay in the same room, for security purposes—you’re a lot safer from enemies if you’re together than if you’re in separate rooms. If the room has only one bed, then you stay in the same bed, whether you’re two men, two women, or whatever. This is serious,” he added, his tone becoming sterner. “Your lives may depend on each other, so

there can't be any goofing around, or worry about goofing around. If anyone acts inappropriately, they'll have to answer to me. Aurors have a lot of power, a lot of discretion, and are given a lot of trust by society. We have to act like adults, not only in this way, but in many others."

Harry himself had been surprised that this could be contemplated, but conversations with Kingsley and Hestia confirmed for him that Aurors had operated efficiently in mixed-gender environments for decades, and the tradition had to be preserved. He knew it would be a challenge; none of the new Aurors were yet twenty years old, and probably some had yet to have their first sexual experience. But if they were going to be Aurors, they had to get used to it, and there was no time like the present. The portraits had been shocked—there had been no female Aurors at all during any of their tenures—but reluctantly admitted that they could not gauge the current social situation.

"I know this isn't easy. But a lot of stuff about being an Auror isn't easy, and we all have to get used to it. We could bring enough tents to have one for every person, but I chose this, because we need to get used to this sort of thing. Ron and Hermione, who are a couple, won't get special treatment, nor will Neville and Ginny, or any couples I don't know about now that there are or may be later. This has always been the case with Auror trainees. There are a lot of burdens on Aurors, and believe me, this is the least of them. People are counting on us, and we have to be a team. We have to know each other, understand each other, respect each other.

"Now, a few things about me. This is something I'm getting used to as well, and it's not exactly impossible that I'll make mistakes. I'll do my best, and make decisions as I see best for wizarding society. You won't agree with every decision I make. If you disagree so much that you want to argue with me, I don't object to that. But I certainly hope that you won't agree with me to my face and disagree behind my back. I'll try to be tolerant of any mistakes you make in good faith, and I hope you'll be tolerant of mine.

"On the other hand, sometimes I'll make a decision based on information I have that you don't, and I can't or shouldn't reveal the

source of that. In cases like that, I'll have to ask you to trust that I know what I'm doing, even when it doesn't make sense to you. For example, I'll tell you this, and this is not just an example, it's what happened. I offered a position as Auror to Draco Malfoy." This caused much greater surprise than had the mixed-gender accommodations. "Now, I understand that may cause you to think—"

"That you're out of your bleedin' mind," George interrupted, looking appalled.

"Yes, exactly," agreed Harry. "So, you could assume that—"

"How could you do that?" demanded Ernie. "He helped You-Know—all right, Voldemort, his family at least, not to mention he was a monster all those years at Hogwarts, especially to you! If he turned over a new leaf, I can understand not putting him in Azkaban. But an Auror?"

Unperturbed, Harry nodded. "That was the reaction I expected, and it's understandable. But as I was saying, you could assume that I'm out of my mind, or you could assume that there are things I know that you don't. I would hope that you'd pick the second," he added wryly. "Like I said, there's going to be times when I just ask you to trust my judgment."

George looked unconvinced. "Kind of a stretch..."

"What did he say?" asked Padma.

"Again, for privacy reasons, I'm not going to say exactly. I'll just say that if he had said yes, he'd be in this room right now—"

"You mean," Parvati interrupted, "that you'd trust him to do the same things as you're asking of us, that you're trusting us with?"

"No. I mean that I thought that if he said yes, knowing what was involved, it would mean he could be trusted like that—"

"Because Malfoy would never lie," muttered George.

Harry tried to repress his annoyance. "I'll at least ask you to believe that I'd thought of that, and that I wouldn't have asked unless I was sure that if he said yes, it would mean that he was willing to do what was asked. And if he'd said yes, I would expect nothing different from him than from any of you. He wouldn't exactly have been popular, and I wouldn't have required you to try to like him. Just to judge him based on current actions rather than past ones, and treat him with the minimum respect with which any Auror should be treated. Since he said no, it's not an issue. But I thought it was a good example of the kind of thing that I might ask of you, to work with someone you strongly dislike. The Code has a few pages dealing with relations between Aurors, and it mentions this kind of situation. We have kind of a tight group here, and that's good. But especially in the future, you're not going to like everyone you work with. But you have to get along with them." Harry couldn't help but think back to his recent three-month stay in Japan, where that notion had been strongly emphasized.

There was a short silence, then Parvati asked a question. "Is there anything we should bring with us? Or, can bring with us? Is there a space limit?"

Her twin sister gave her a wry grin. "Thinking about how you're going to dress?" A few people chuckled.

"There won't be any formal occasions," Harry joked. More seriously, he added, "No suitcases, though of course you can magically reduce the size of things like clothes for the trip. Basically, anything that can fit in a backpack or shoulder bag. If you want to bring a magical artifact, please check with me before you do it. We'll mostly be wearing Auror robes, though for some aspects of training they won't be necessary. The weather will be warm, for the most part, even in winter, but a few cold days aren't impossible, so keep that in mind when packing.

"I expect that no one will say anything about going back in time; that's not something I want to read about in the Prophet. Only the people who eventually go should know, and I mean, not a single other person. Okay?"

“If it’s not risky,” asked Ernie, “why does it matter if the Prophet knows?”

Hermione spoke before Harry could. “I think Harry doesn’t want to have to be explaining himself to the Prophet all the time. Also, as he said before, the less the Dark wizards know about what we do, the better. Is that right, Harry?”

He nodded. “Exactly, both of them. As Auror Leader, I’m not accountable to anyone; I can do what I want. But I’ve read that previous Auror Leaders always had at least one person outside the Aurors who was trustworthy, who the Auror Leader always told what he was doing. That person—the unofficial name for it was the Devil’s Advocate—his job was to question the Leader, to make sure he understood the implications of what he was doing, to make sure he didn’t become some kind of unaccountable dictator who nobody would tell the truth to. For me, right now, that person is Kingsley. Not because he’s Minister, but because he’s a former Auror, and can understand my situation pretty well. Be assured that he doesn’t hesitate to tell me when he thinks I’m wrong, and I don’t want you to, either. I mean, if you just don’t happen to like what I do, then there may not be much we can do about that. But if you think it’s wrong, for some logical reason, then certainly I want to hear about it, assuming I don’t already know your opinion.”

He exhaled, then paused. “I think that’s all I wanted to tell you right now. The fact is, I was going to tell you a lot of this more slowly, over time, but Kingsley thought that before we leave, I should tell you the stuff you might not be too happy to hear, so nobody feels that they might not have come if they’d known such-and-such. Not that I think it will, but if anyone wants to reconsider their decision, you have 48 hours in which to do it.” There was no reaction.

“Okay. Now, does anyone have any problems with anything I just said? This isn’t your only chance, if you think of something later, but I just want to know for now.”

Michael Corner raised a hand. It would be him, thought Harry sardonically. “You said you don’t want to have to explain yourself to the Prophet. But since you’re unaccountable to the law, shouldn’t you

have to explain yourself to the public in some way? I mean, it seems a little... not trying to be insulting, but a little arrogant.”

Harry paused in order to mask his emotions before responding. “I understand that. But let me ask... do you ask this because of genuine concern for the issues involved? Or just out of curiosity, to be devil’s advocate?”

A ‘you caught me’ expression flashed across Corner’s face before he answered. “A little of each,” he admitted. “I can’t say I’m super-concerned, but it seems like a reasonable point.”

Harry nodded, about to respond, when Angelina chimed in. “My uncle’s a reporter for the Prophet,” she said, “and I’ve heard him talk about it more than once. He’s proud of his job, because he feels that the press has a real responsibility, to keep leaders honest, and that society would be much worse off without them.”

“I understand that,” said Harry solemnly, “and I don’t plan never to talk to the Prophet. But, and again this isn’t from personal experience, but what I’ve been told, and from Auror Leader chronicles... the whole point of the Auror Leader is that he’ll do what’s right for society. The test proves that. One of the rights of an Auror who serves under the Auror Leader is the right to view, in a Pensieve, the Leader’s memories of the test. This right extends to full-fledged Aurors, not trainees, but I’m extending it to all of you, once we’re on the island. And let me tell you: passing is much, much worse than failing. It’s excruciating; I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. I’m sure that anyone who views it would know that the Leader isn’t going to act out of selfish motives—“

“Harry, nobody’s saying you’re going to act selfishly—“ began Corner.

“I know, but let me finish,” responded Harry. “The point is, you can question somebody based on their motives, or their competence. If you assume my motives are unselfish, based on what’s good for society, that leaves competence. And the Prophet can’t begin to judge my competence in any way other than results, so that’s how I’ll be judged. But before things happen they won’t know what I know, and their knowing more will only lead to speculation, and lots of public

commentary based on partial knowledge, which would only hurt my efforts. So, there's some stuff I'll tell them after it happens, but not before. Does that make sense?"

Corner slowly nodded. "Yeah, I guess," he conceded. Angelina nodded silently.

"Okay," said Harry. "Anything else?"

There was silence. Finally, as Harry was about to speak again, George spoke one word plaintively, in disbelief, as if speaking to himself. "Malfoy?"

Most everyone present chuckled, including Harry. "Thank you, George. Well, that seems to be all. I'll see you all tomorrow night at the Hog's Head, but if you need me before then, you know how to reach me." Touching his wand, he Disapparated. This had been on Hestia's advice; by leaving first, he gave the fledgling Aurors the chance to talk among themselves about what they'd heard. It would be important, she had told him, that they be able to talk freely out of his presence from time to time, to help each other 'wrap their minds around' unexpected directives.

Two hours later, Ron and Hermione Apparated into the living room of Grimmauld Place. Hearing the telltale popping sound, Harry turned toward them from his seat at the table in front of Dumbledore's portrait, which hung on the wall a foot above the table. "Hi," he greeted them. "Did you go somewhere after the meeting broke up?"

They sat at the table and nodded their greetings to Dumbledore, who was currently in the frame, and had been talking to Harry when they had arrived. "No," said Hermione. "We were talking all that time."

"Wow," said Harry, eyebrows high. "About what?"

"A few things," she said, "one of which had to do with Ron and me, and our relationship with you. You see, we were talking about other things for twenty minutes—mainly about the sleeping arrangements—when somebody pointed out that Ron and I would be going back to this house where you live, where we could relay the whole

conversation if we wanted to. Not that people wanted to talk badly about you, but they want to be able to say what they think without worrying about it getting back to you.”

“Very understandable,” suggested Dumbledore. “You and Ron could find yourselves ostracized if people do not feel they can speak freely around you.”

“But it’s not as though Ron and I can’t tell you anything, either,” she continued. “So we spent some time on that, and agreed on some ground rules. The main one is, no names. Positive or negative things. Also, nothing specific that sounds critical gets back to you, even without a name. We can give you the general sense of how people feel. There was some division about this, too. Some people didn’t like the debate itself, feeling that it seemed ‘anti-Harry,’ as one person said. The other got kind of defensive, saying that wasn’t what was intended, that it was just to clarify things. Another one pointed out that Ron and I could function as unofficial messengers of the group’s feelings to you, if it seemed like a good idea.”

“Seems reasonable,” Harry agreed. “So, what was the verdict on the sleeping arrangements question?”

Ron sighed. “That it’s going to take some getting used to, though everyone can see the point. I said at one point that I wasn’t happy with not getting advance warning about that, and a half dozen people jumped on me, saying there’s no reason I should. Hermione’s silence,” he added, with a slightly reproachful look in her direction, “told me she agreed with them.”

“At least I kept silent about it,” she retorted. “I was restraining myself. Of course, we shouldn’t get advance notice, or any special privileges. A few people said they thought it was a good thing you didn’t tell us first, that it meant you weren’t going to favor us. I could tell from the expressions that most everyone had thought about the topic. It was good to clear the air about that.”

“Well, I will be talking to you guys more, and asking your advice, things like that,” Harry said. “You’re my friends, and I’m not going to

apologize for that. But I do know that I have to be careful of how it looks. So, was there anything else it'd be good for me to know?"

His two friends exchanged glances. "The Malfoy thing came up," said Ron. "There was a general... amazement, I guess. Someone asked me and Hermione if we knew anything; I just said whatever we know we shouldn't talk about. That got people going even more, like, wow, whatever it is, it must be incredible. People were reminiscing about their favorite Malfoy experiences, what a fantastic guy he always was." The last sentence was said with sufficient sarcasm, though Harry would have understood had it been deadpan.

"Not much else," added Hermione. "You should know, Harry, that there was a lot of respect for you in that room. Nobody thinks you're a god, but everyone knows what you've been through in your life, how hard it's been for you. I said that it still was, so you needed our help. People agreed that while we want to help society, a lot of our motivation was to help you, specifically."

Harry nodded. He didn't reply, but felt quite touched by the sentiment. He looked up at the portrait, and saw Dumbledore with a wise, gentle smile, clearly understanding what Harry was feeling.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 2: After reaching the island and going back in time, Harry finds himself going even further back than he'd planned, causing some in the group to question his judgment.

From Chapter 2: Kingsley held up a hand. "Harry, you might want to take a few minutes, think this through. Phoenixes can teleport, and you don't know that he won't inadvertently do something to endanger the timeline. It's an unknown element of risk—"

Fawkes shook his hind quarters, causing his long tail to whip back and forth. Ron and Hermione had walked over, and were standing next to Harry. "I think that means there's no time to lose," said Harry.

Chapter 2

One Last Visit

The next two days felt like two weeks to Harry, as he spent a great deal of time in the Auror Leader sanctuary, where time didn't move. He had long discussions with the portraits about training and tactics, and spent many hours reading ancient books to which they directed him. In addition, the tenth Leader had taken over soon after a war in which the Auror ranks had been decimated, and so had been in a similar situation to Harry: a war hero who had to recruit many new Aurors at the same time. The main difference was that that Leader's recruits had been almost a generation younger, while Harry's recruits were his contemporaries, leading to unique problems. Still, he found the Leader's experiences interesting and useful.

Harry was walking through Diagon Alley for the last time before the trip. He would not see the place again for a year, but had to remind himself that he would be back the next day, from the inhabitants' point of view. He passed by a cul-de-sac known informally as Gourmet Alley, as it contained nothing but a dozen mid- to high-end restaurants. The largest, at the far end, was called the Golden Dragon, and from the outside it looked even fancier than Malfoy Manor. He'd heard that the cheapest meal still cost more than ten Galleons, which was more than an average day's salary for most wizards. He imagined its interior had to be highly ornate and decorative. Not my kind of place, he thought. The owner had once stopped Harry in the street, introduced himself, and tried to invite Harry and whoever he chose to bring 'as our guest.' Harry assumed that meant he would not be expected to pay; he said as politely as possible that he would try to do so sometime. He wondered if the man had read the article on Harry that had appeared in *Witch Weekly*; Harry had made a point of saying (and of making sure that Pinter included it in the article) that he couldn't and wouldn't accept free service or merchandise from any business, much as he appreciated the intentions of those who made such offers. On telling the Leader portraits what he had said, he found that most thought he was being overly fussy and cautious, though the two most recent thought it was a good idea.

Turning down the next street, an owl flew over his head and dropped a letter in front of him. Harry absently wondered why some owls dropped their letters while others' were attached to their legs. He levitated it high enough to easily grasp it, then opened it. To his surprise, there were only three words: Malfoy Manor—NOW!

With a slight chuckle—surely no one else in England would speak to him in such a tone—Harry thought briefly of ignoring it, but realized that either it was important, or Malfoy was quite angry. In either case, his curiosity had been piqued. Shrugging, he Disapparated.

He appeared in front of Malfoy Manor, at the beginning of the brick path that led to the front door. He walked towards it, but a second later heard the popping of an Apparition. He turned to see Malfoy, who was wearing a slightly hostile expression.

“You rang?” asked Harry lightly, in a tone not meant to be snide, but to tweak Malfoy about the peremptory tone of his owl.

“You’re fucking right I rang,” responded Malfoy; Harry couldn’t help but raise his eyebrows at Malfoy’s use of language. Since Malfoy hadn’t sworn much at Hogwarts, even when there were no teachers to overhear, Harry assumed that Malfoy was truly angry. “I want to know if you’re being deceitful, or just an idiot.”

It struck Harry as mildly interesting that he wasn’t even slightly offended at Malfoy’s insults. Since the conversation they’d had in which both had been under the influence of Veritaserum, they felt they understood each other. “Since I’m pretty sure I haven’t been deceitful, it must be the second one, at least by your reckoning. So, what did I do?”

Malfoy stared in amazement. “You really don’t know.”

Harry shook his head. “But I’ll admit, now I’m pretty curious.”

Rolling his eyes, Malfoy gestured Harry to walk along another path, which seemed to lead to a garden a few dozen meters away from the mansion. “You told the Auror-lings that you asked me to join.”

Harry gave Malfoy a sharp glance. "How do you know that?"

"Never mind how I know! It's true, right?"

"Yeah, it is! So what?"

Malfoy shook his head, as if unable to believe what he had heard. "You must be kidding. Yes, I know you're not. So, Potter, have a go. Why would you guess I'm ticked off about this?"

Harry paused to think it over. "You don't want any communication with me, or any part of it—even the parts I said—told to anyone else without your permission?"

Malfoy sighed. "Yes, of course, but that's not even the main thing. The problem is that you told them that you asked me. The mere fact that you asked me tells them more than I want them, or anyone, knowing. It tells them that you trust me, or at least, think it's possible that I could be trusted. I see that look on your face that says, what's wrong with that? What's wrong, Potter, is that there's a high level of confidentiality around the way you know that. You may not have repeated anything I said, but you gave information from which can be deduced things that I want to be the one to decide whether to reveal to people or not. Maybe I want to keep people guessing about my intentions, maybe I want shady characters to think I'm on their side. The point is, that's for me to decide, not you. What you told them betrayed my confidence, even if you didn't mean for it to."

Harry thought it over, and was chagrined to realize that there was nothing Malfoy had said that he could dispute. Making eye contact with Malfoy, he said simply, "You're right. I apologize."

Malfoy's eyebrows rose; he apparently hadn't expected that. "You shouldn't have done that, I was going to rake you over the coals some more."

Amused at having taken the wind out of Malfoy's sails, he responded, "Sorry about that. Do go on."

"Ah, never mind. Now, damage control. Did you say anything else?"

“No.”

“Are they likely to spread it around?”

“I don’t think so. I’m surprised it even got back to you in the first place. I was very specific in saying to them that anything I said wasn’t to leave the room.”

“Next time, mention the part about making sure no one can deduce it by other things they do or say,” said Malfoy humorously.

“Good point,” agreed Harry. “So, are you going to tell me how you heard?”

Malfoy shrugged. “Ah, you’d probably find out anyway, he’ll probably admit it. I ran into Boot an hour ago in Diagon Alley, and he just sort of spitted it out. ‘So Malfoy, I heard you almost became an Auror.’ Imagine my surprise. Thank Merlin no one was around. I just denied it, let him have a few insults, and got out of there.”

“Ah, I see. He probably thought it was okay to mention it because you already knew, so nobody new was finding out. Well, I’ll talk to them, let them know that was my fault, and warn them not to make the same mistake themselves. Anyway, I’m pretty sure that no one else will let it slip, but I’ll ask them and make sure.”

“Why did you tell them, anyway?”

“An example of the fact that they weren’t going to agree with everything I did.”

“Good example,” agreed Malfoy. “So, how do you like being Auror Leader?”

Harry chuckled humorlessly. “It’s weird. I have to learn ten million things, have this huge responsibility and pressure. I have huge popular support, but it’s hard to take satisfaction in that, because I know it can change. And... not the Auror-lings, as you call them, but

a lot of the people in Diagon Alley are trying really hard to kiss my ass. Which isn't as much fun as you'd think."

"I could get used to it," said Malfoy, with a small grin. "But I get why you don't like it. They're just out for something, which is something I'd take for granted, but you probably aren't used to yet. It's funny, we had that conversation about influence, then without trying, you go from having big influence to being the most influential person in society for the next half-century. If the people in Diagon Alley knew what I know about you, they'd treat you like a normal person, and it'd work better, you'd like them a lot more."

Harry nodded. "True. A few of them do, and they're the ones I like."

"So, why did you decide to bump Umbridge out of her Undersecretary seat?"

Harry had already been told by Kingsley that it was well known throughout the political world that she had resigned at Harry's instigation. "Yeah, it seems I wasn't subtle enough about that."

"About as subtle as a brick through a window," agreed Malfoy. "C'mon, you're seen talking to her at St. Mungo's, then she resigns the next day. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. So, why?"

"Mainly because she deserved it—she deserved worse, really—for what she did to Muggles during the Voldemort time. And trying to kill me, of course. Also, to open up an Undersecretary slot for Kingsley to fill, so he has at least one supporter, and doesn't have to worry about a coup so much." A Minister could be deposed by the unanimous agreement of all the undersecretaries, though it rarely actually happened.

"They'd never dare," said Malfoy. "Not with you supporting him publicly. I'm not surprised by your answer, but it's funny as hell. Some people in the political world were saying that what you did was a master stroke." Malfoy giggled slightly at the thought. "Since pushing her out was the first thing you did as Leader, they thought that you were deliberately asserting your influence, making an example of her, to say that they shouldn't cross you. And she was the perfect one to

do it to, since you had the goods on her. And, you had just saved her life, so that made it even better! He saves her life, then cuts her off at the knees. Don't screw with him." Malfoy chuckled. "If they only knew."

"You won't tell them, will you?"

"Not cheaply, anyway."

Harry grinned, understanding that Malfoy was kidding, and that both clearly understood that all conversations were confidential. "Of course, I should have known." Having reached the garden area, he looked up to see a dozen rows of what looked like small trees, the tallest of which was no taller than twelve feet. "What are these?"

"They're coffee plants. This is one of the rarest varieties in the world."

"I thought coffee couldn't grow in England."

"Well, Potter, there's this thing called 'magic,' and you use it—"

"Very funny."

They chatted for ten more minutes before Harry left, reflecting that Malfoy would be one of the few people he could just be himself with when he talked, without worrying about rank or responsibility or appearances. Funny world, he thought.

* * * * *

At 6:00 that evening, he Apparated to the Park and found all the Auror recruits in the lounge in which he'd talked to them two days ago. A quick head count revealed fifteen. Harry breathed a slight sigh of relief; no one had decided to back out.

"Okay, I have a few things to say before we go. First, I got an angry owl from Malfoy wanting to know why I told people that I offered him—"

Harry cut himself off as Terry Boot raised his hand. "I'm sorry, that was my fault," he said, going on to relate the incident in Diagon Alley much as Malfoy had. "I realized afterwards that I shouldn't have done it, and by his denial that it was something he didn't want people knowing."

Harry nodded. "We live and learn. And thank you for admitting that it was you. It's not as though I'm never going to make mistakes, and I'll tolerate them a lot better if you admit it and try to find out where you went wrong than if you deny them, or are too defensive, like, I couldn't possibly make a mistake." Relating something he'd been told by the Leader portraits—something he imagined he'd be doing a lot, given that he was getting the benefit of centuries of accumulated wisdom—he added, "Making a mistake is a problem, but a much bigger problem is failing to recognize the mistake, and making the same mistake repeatedly. Back to the Malfoy thing, I shouldn't have told you what I did, since I had an understanding with him that I inadvertently broke. So you can learn from my mistake, and not only don't repeat something private, but don't do or say anything that allows someone to guess the private thing. And as for Malfoy himself, don't draw any conclusions about him. If you deal with him in the future, don't assume you can trust him. He has an understanding with me, but not with you."

"Now, as you know, Kingsley and Hestia are coming with us. I already said that Kingsley is a former Auror there, not the Minister. Hestia is an Auror, but she has no authority over you except for any that I specifically give her, which I might in some situations. But they are the only people alive with Auror experience, so we'll all do well to listen carefully to what they have to say."

"I also want to say... when I was in Japan from June to September, I found that it was a very group-oriented culture, compared to ours, in which the individual is more important. That was strange to me, and it took me a while to get used to living there. There are bad points to it: people can't really be themselves, if they're pretty different from most people. They have to pretend they're like everyone else. Their choice of actions is much more restricted than ours. But there are also good points, for example, greater social security, a feeling of belonging, comfort in numbers. I mention this because we're a group now, and I

hope we can have a group feeling. I don't want anyone to repress their individuality, but I do want us to keep strongly in mind that we are a group, and that we have responsibilities to each other as well as to society. So let's take our relationships with each other seriously, be honest with each other, but not offensive if we can help it. If someone criticizes you, think about it carefully and don't take it as an insult. If someone insults you... well, there shouldn't be any of that. Tell them you felt insulted; maybe it was a misunderstanding. But never say to yourself, 'I don't give a damn if I don't get along with Auror Smith or Auror Jones.' It should matter. If you don't like someone, get to know them better. You might find something you like."

"Like you and Malfoy?" asked George with a knowing look.

Harry grinned. "No comment. Lastly, I want to bring the other people who are coming. I'll escort them in by Apparition, one at a time."

Harry disappeared, reappearing in a few seconds arm in arm with Luna. "Hello, everyone," said Luna cheerfully. "It's nice to be with you."

There was a chorus of friendly greetings. "So, why are you coming along?" asked George.

"To talk to my father," said Luna simply.

This drew some puzzled looks. "Is this the thing that you said was Luna's private matter?" asked Padma.

Harry nodded. "Not anymore, apparently."

Luna glanced at him in surprise. "I'm sorry, should I not have said anything?"

Harry grinned. "No, it's fine. I meant it was up to you. Next..." He Disapparated again, then reappeared, holding the arm of Cho Chang. Harry could see the surprise on many faces. Cho waved at the group as Harry spoke again. "Cho is here mostly in a medical capacity. She's spent the last year or so in the Healer training program, and

her job is to look after the medical condition of everyone who goes. Only healthy, mostly young people are going, so she shouldn't be very busy with that, but she'll be able to take care of most types of non-major injuries or diseases, things like that."

Ernie raised a hand. "That reminds me, I was thinking yesterday, what happens if there's a life-threatening illness or injury while we're there?"

"Of course, that has been thought of," said Harry. "Soon after we arrive, Kingsley will fly to Australia. There are a few small islands between ours and there that he can hop between by Apparating, to save some time, but it'll still take twelve hours of flying time. Landing in Australia, he'll set up a long-range Portkey in an isolated spot within Apparition range of a hospital, well camouflaged. Then, he'll take the Portkey back here. The danger to the timeline is minimal, since records show that there was no travel between England and Australia during the Voldemort time. Still, we take the timeline danger seriously, because it's so grave. That Portkey will only be used in a critical situation, and we don't expect to have to use it at all.

"Back to Cho, she's also responsible for teaching everyone first aid, which all Aurors should know. She and Padma, it turns out, share an interest in nutritional science, which I didn't even know was a kind of science, but anyway, they know spells which will increase the nutritional content of the food we're bringing, which as you know has already been purchased and miniaturized."

"Do you know any spells that will help the taste of the food?" asked George hopefully, to chuckles. "Non-fresh, miniaturized food doesn't sound like the most appetizing thing in the world."

"This is the individuality I was talking about earlier," said Harry wryly.

"I just said what I'm sure most people were thinking," protested George.

"Well, maybe. No, this year is not going to be a gourmet's delight. But this is a sacrifice you make for society."

"I hope society appreciates it," grumbled George.

"Probably not specifically," answered Harry. "But Aurors are given a lot of respect by society, and it's partly for things like this, even if they don't know the specifics. You all may have had some experience already where people treated you differently because you've been selected, which I assume most people know about." Half a dozen heads nodded in agreement.

"Not to criticize you," said Parvati, "but just so you know, Lavender wasn't happy that you didn't even talk to her about this."

Surprised, Harry asked, "Is there anyone here who thinks I should have chosen Lavender?" It was well known, he thought, that Lavender had been one of the weakest DA members.

"That's not what I meant," said Parvati, annoyed. "Not that you didn't choose her, but that you didn't talk to her."

"What's the point of talking to her if I had no intention of choosing her?"

Cho spoke. "I think the idea is, you could have let her down easy," she said, as Parvati nodded. "Not that you had to offer her a spot, but talk to her, ask what she intended to do in the future, tell her you might ask her for help sometimes, like that. Since you talked to almost every DA member, she felt bad that you didn't talk to her. It's not a bad thing to keep in mind for the future."

Harry nodded, recalling that the Leader portraits had emphasized the quality of empathy as one most needed by an Auror Leader. He also realized that Lavender might have been especially stung as the only member of that year's Gryffindor class not joining the Aurors. "I will," he said. "Anyway, Cho will also be helping Luna in the general 'things that need to get done' area. They'll be gathering fresh fruits, nuts, and vegetables, which there are on the island but not enough to have every day. There are also some animals, like pigs, chickens, and turkeys, and of course we can fish."

“How did chickens and pigs get to a South Pacific island?” wondered George. “Well, okay, the chickens flew, but the pigs?”

“It’s been used for purposes like this before,” Harry acknowledged, getting the thrust of George’s question. “Luna is... less than fond of the idea of slaughtering animals, so Cho will—“

“No, I’ve changed my mind,” said Luna. “I’ll help with that.”

“Are you sure?” asked Harry.

Luna nodded determinedly. “It’s not fair to make Cho do all of it. If I eat meat, and I do, then I should be able to do that.”

“I was going to say,” put in Harry, “that Kingsley tells me that this is something every Auror should know how to do, in case you’re in the jungle in some survival situation. I know, there are no jungles in England, but you get the idea. That kind of training isn’t usually in the first three years, since it’s not that important, but since we’ll be there anyway... Cho and Luna will have the main responsibility, but all of us, including me, will be taking our turns.”

He paused, trying to think of anything that he felt he should say that he hadn’t said yet. “Oh, yes... not that this’ll be relevant, but I’m told that it’s important that while we’re back in time, there be no further disruptions in the ‘space-time continuum,’ I think was the phrase used. Basically, that one disruption was not specifically dangerous, but one on top of another could have a...” he paused to remember, “a geometric effect on space-time. So, for example, nobody should get the idea that we should use the Time-Turner for any reason once we’ve already used it the first time. Not that we would, but I’m just saying, it’s important not to.”

Harry confirmed again that no one had any allergies, medication needs, or other conditions or requirements that would present a problem for being separated from most of society for a year. Satisfied, he announced that Kingsley and Hestia would now arrive. He Disappeared, then came back in a few seconds with the two, both of whom were wearing shoulder bags that they put down.

Harry sat on the edge of a nearby easy chair as Kingsley addressed the group. “Hello. I’ve met some of you, though not all; I’d say introductions aren’t really necessary now, as we’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other.

“I’m speaking to you right now as Minister. Once we’re on the island, I’ll just be Kingsley. And on the subject of titles, I should say that when you’re speaking in public, or to people you don’t know well, you should—this is a suggestion, not a command, since even as Minister I’m not in a position to tell you what to do—you should refer to Harry as ‘Leader Potter.’ Harry’s not the type who stands on ceremony, but sometimes it’s a good idea to emphasize his role, because it’s a very serious thing. He has a grave responsibility, the responsibility to keep society safe. In helping him, you are also serving that function. Whether your motive for joining was that, or to help Harry specifically, as Minister—the representative of the people—I want to thank you officially for helping him shoulder this burden.

“All right, that’s all I have to say as Minister, but I do mean it as well. Harry, all the supplies are in the room,” he said, pointing his wand at a tall, thin object that looked like a hat rack with no hooks on which to hang hats, “and the two-way Portkey is now active. So, everyone should move on out.”

Harry nodded. “Kingsley, you go first; I’ll go last.” Not that he expected there to be any stragglers, but it just seemed like a good idea in general. Everyone picked up their bag or backpack, and one by one or two by two grasped the pole and disappeared. When all had gone, Harry finally did so.

Arriving in the large room, Harry deactivated the Portkey as he heard Kingsley already speaking. “We’re in the Foreign Ministry, what they call the Departure Lounge. Sometimes diplomats travel great distances to other countries, and of course, they don’t do it by flying. This opens up a portal leading to another spot on the globe. Usually, it’s set to the exact coordinates of another country’s foreign ministry, and both sides must agree before any travel can take place. It’s rare to use it as we are now; the Foreign Ministry is rather protective of this system, since it could cause an international incident if misused. In fact, even though I’m the Minister, I got a lot of resistance when I

said it would be used without their oversight. Only when I told them that the Auror Leader wanted it did they stop their protests.”

“Bet they still complained among themselves,” said Harry.

“Probably doing it right now,” agreed Kingsley as he operated the controls. “Harry, longitude and latitude, please?”

Harry stepped over and entered the numbers on the paper he had brought from the Auror Leader sanctuary: -9.139455 latitude, 166.378981 longitude. He entered them carefully, then checked them again.

“Why is Harry doing it?” wondered Padma.

“Because the island’s location is secret,” said Kingsley. “No one but Auror Leaders can know it, and no one but Aurors should even know that it exists.”

“What if Harry enters the information wrong?” asked Parvati, seeming to be trying to control nervousness.

Without looking up from his checking, Harry answered, “Then, we go for a swim in the warm South Pacific.” Now looking up at her, he added, deadpan, “You can swim, right?”

A few people exchanged concerned glances; George grinned. “Harry! You’re developing a sense of humor! Fred will be proud. Can’t wait to tell him.”

Now, Harry smiled. “Don’t worry, these coordinates are accurate to six decimal places, and I’ve checked three times. Hermione, how far is a millionth of a degree longitude?

She thought for a few seconds. “A few feet. Pretty accurate.”

A few people gaped at her, including Ron. “You can do it that fast?”

“There are formulas in Arithmancy,” explained Padma, as Hermione nodded.

Harry pulled a lever, and the far wall lit up; a view of the path from where they stood to their destination started to unfold in front of them, as if the leading edge of the path was a camera. It sped over land for a few seconds, then there was nothing but water. Looking at a globe, Kingsley said, "The first land we see should be the U.S., Florida State, followed by the Gulf of Mexico, then Mexico."

A minute in, there was land for another few seconds, then water, then land, then water again. "Now, nothing but water until our destination."

It was hard to get a sense of movement now, as the water remained more or less constant; the only difference to be seen was cloud cover changing. After another minute, the Auror recruits watching raptly, the scene finally reached a halt. The sun shone over a calm, blue ocean.

The recruits exchanged glances. "Where is it?" asked Ginny.

"I thought that might happen," said Kingsley. "We can't see it. Presumably, we will see it when we get there."

"Presumably?" repeated George, feigning concern.

"I have to be first," announced Harry. "As soon as I set foot on it, we'll all be able to see it. I mean, we're all going together, but I have to be at the head of the line. Kingsley, you'll take up the rear." Harry realized that this was an interesting opportunity to take the measure of his comrades. Many, like Ron and Hermione, were unruffled, obviously trusting in Harry completely. Others, especially Corner, Parvati, and Seamus, seemed to be trying to affect the expressions the others came by naturally.

Kingsley gestured them to a very long golden... it didn't look to Harry like a rope exactly, but it was the closest thing he could think of. Cable, perhaps. "Everyone wraps this around their body three times, with twenty feet in between," instructed Kingsley. "If somebody falls off—which, believe me, isn't going to happen—we'll just pull them back up. We'll also be attaching these crates, with the miniaturized supplies, and the crates of course have been made virtually

weightless. The rope is strictly a precaution, always used when large numbers are traveling over water.”

Harry wrapped it around his waist, over his shoulder across his body, and around his waist again. One at a time, everyone else did so, and ten minutes later, they were finally ready.

He walked into the wall; there was no massive movement at first, and he realized things wouldn't start zipping by until everyone was on the path. About a half a minute later, the familiar feeling kicked in, and land was zooming by on all sides. He heard a few exclamations of surprise at the unusual sensation; a few people said 'wow!' and 'cool!'

Harry didn't talk while he walked. He had the impulse to look behind him, but decided not to, that if there was any problem he would hear about it. He headed straight down the path. Land, water land... Florida, Mexico, he remembered Kingsley saying.

Finally, the accelerated movement stopped. He continued walking, apparently into the water... even though he knew his foot would hit land, his body prepared to fall in... the water was firm—as soon as his foot touched it, he was surrounded by land, trees... they were there! He had been sure, but it was another thing to see the island come to life around him. He walked a few feet ahead and turned, trying to make sure there was enough room for those behind him to comfortably come out. He started to unwrap the rope, and was soon free.

He saw some people putting down the boxes; soon, the last person had emerged from the portal. They were not far from a beach, perhaps 20 meters. The ground under their feet was partly sand but mostly dirt. A dense patch of trees was not too far away, the weather was sunny and warm. He looked up; seagulls were flying, along with one somewhat larger bird. Harry noticed that it was orange; could it be a phoenix? Did they live on this island?

“Okay, everyone, gather around,” said Harry. “Time to go back.” He had already agreed with Kingsley and the Leader portraits that they would go back in time as soon as they got there, so there would be less chance that the group, once they had made it back to the current

time naturally, would accidentally come across themselves as they were now.

Everyone stood in a circle, with the large boxes in the center of the circle. The golden cord was wrapped around the group several times, the ends tied together, and the Time-Turner attached to the cord. Harry's spell caused both to glow, a glow that extended to all of the people, and the boxes in the center. Everything would go back as it was supposed to.

"Here we go," said Harry. The Time-Turner had been modified to work in increments of years rather than hours. Harry gave it one turn.

When he had used it before, things whizzed by them, super-fast, in reverse. This time nothing seemed to happen; he wondered if the group never ventured near this area, or if they were going back so fast that individual actions couldn't be seen. He could see trees and other plants getting smaller.

Finally it stopped. There was no discernible difference, but Harry was satisfied that it had worked. It should now be October 7, 1997.

"Hey, look!" shouted Neville. A phoenix descended rapidly, heading towards the group.

"Is that Fawkes?" asked Padma. Harry realized he had no idea, since he had never seen another phoenix; for all he knew, they could all look exactly alike.

The phoenix swooped past the group at eye level, coming to a halt in front of Harry. Hovering in front of him, its back to him, its tail feathers were just a foot in front of Harry's face.

Kingsley walked over to get a look from the front. "This is Fawkes, I'm almost certain."

"What does he want?" asked Parvati.

Harry had no doubt. "I'm supposed to grab onto his tail feathers. He's going to take me somewhere." He started to reach out, but Kingsley

held up a hand. “Harry, you might want to take a few minutes, think this through. Phoenixes can teleport, and you don’t know that he won’t inadvertently do something to endanger the timeline. It’s an unknown element of risk—“

Fawkes shook his hind quarters, causing his long tail to whip back and forth. Ron and Hermione had walked over, and were standing next to Harry. “I think that means there’s no time to lose,” said Harry.

Kingsley moved to walk in between Harry and Fawkes. He didn’t shove Harry, but moved to within a few inches of him, a distance that caused most people to unconsciously back off. Harry, however, wasn’t going to. “Stand back!” he barked at Kingsley who, taken aback, abruptly did so.

“I know Fawkes,” said Harry firmly. Fawkes had stopped the tail movement, but continued to hover where he was. “He saved my life once, and I’m sure he wouldn’t do anything to endanger me or something important to me, like the timeline. Professor Dumbledore said once that phoenixes know the best thing to do, and that’s what I’m going to assume here. I’m doing this.” Harry reached out and grabbed the tail. Fawkes started flying, and in a bright flash of light, he and Harry were suddenly gone.

* * * * *

Harry was suddenly near the ceiling of a room—a very familiar one. Even before he looked down, he felt he knew where he was, as the smell, while being nothing he could pin down—slightly musty, perhaps—was associated with this room. He looked down as they descended, and his hunch proved correct: they were in the headmaster’s office. As they reached the floor, Harry saw to his alarm that the person behind the desk was Albus Dumbledore.

Mild panic hit him as he realized that in October 1997, Dumbledore had already been dead for four months... could Fawkes have taken him back in time?

Dumbledore looked up, and appeared equally shaken. “Harry? But this is not... why would Fawkes...” He then gaped as he saw Harry’s

Auror robe, with the insignia of the Auror Leader near the collar on the left side. “Auror Leader?”

He immediately took out his wand and pointed it at Harry’s forehead. Harry couldn’t see the result, but saw from Dumbledore’s expression that it confirmed what the collar indicated. “Professor, what—“

Dumbledore cut him off with a gesture as he reached for a long, thin metallic instrument that reminded Harry of a conductor’s baton, too thin to be a magic wand. He pointed it at Harry’s head, then broke out into a smile. “It is gone! The Horcrux is gone! You are... from the future?”

Dumbfounded, Harry nodded. Dumbledore’s grin became even more radiant. “Then you survived! My dear boy, I cannot tell you how pleased I am to know this. I did not dare hope... and Auror Leader! But you are still so young! Harry, what is your age?”

“Professor, I really shouldn’t say anything. If we damage the timeline—“

“Fear not, my boy. I would not do anything to damage such a happy future. Voldemort is defeated?” Harry nodded; Dumbledore closed his eyes in triumph. “Oh, thank you Harry, and thank you, Fawkes, for letting me know this. You know that I do not have much time left. I can die truly at peace.”

Despite Dumbledore’s assurances, Harry still felt slightly panicked at the notion that the timeline was in serious danger; the Leader portraits had hammered the message home strongly. Now, it seemed, there were dozens of ways in which it could be irreparably damaged. What if Snape were to suddenly walk in... “Professor, when is this?”

“It is late June, 1997, the end of your sixth year at Hogwarts. In one hour, I will call on you—the younger you, of course—to join me on a quest to procure one of the Horcruxes.” Dumbledore eyed Harry carefully, noting Harry’s mild cringe and his eyes. “I gather from your face that today is to be my last. Is it not?”

“Professor, please!” Harry nearly pleaded. “The timeline’s already in enough trouble as it is—“

“Harry!” said Dumbledore, generating a more commanding tone without raising his voice. “You have my absolute vow that no matter what you tell me, nothing will change. I believe this is why Fawkes felt it safe—he certainly would not have done this if it would destroy the timeline—for if I am to die in a matter of hours, there is little damage I could do even if I chose to. However, nothing will change. Now, do you believe me? Do you trust me?”

Confronted so directly, Harry found he had little choice. Exhaling a deep breath he hadn’t noticed taking, he said, “Yes.” The extra words ‘I trusted you even when you sent me to my death’ almost came to his lips, but this had already been discussed in the King’s Cross meeting, and it would wound Dumbledore, who had really had no other reasonable options, to no good purpose. With a little difficulty, Harry held his tongue.

“Good. Now, how old are you?”

Harry paused for a few seconds. “Eighteen years, two months.” He went on to explain why Kingsley had thrown him into the test; Dumbledore nodded. “We had feared Voldemort might tempt some Aurors, but we did not expect he would be as successful as he was, or, will be.

“Now, Harry, you must tell me all of what is to happen today, so I can be careful to replicate it as exactly as possible. All will happen as it did, but extra care must be taken, I’m sure you will agree.”

Restraining the urge to protest yet again—he felt at this point he had no choice but to completely trust Dumbledore, and Fawkes—he launched into an account of that fateful day. Dumbledore listened carefully and, at the end nodded, satisfied. “Severus did me, and Mr. Malfoy, a great service. How did Mr. Malfoy fare, after these events?

Harry gave a brief account of Malfoy’s activities, finishing with, “It looks very much like he’s going to take a different path than his father.”

Dumbledore nodded. "Good, very good. Again, as much as I could have hoped for. And Severus?"

Harry shook his head. "Killed by Voldemort, less that a day before Voldemort's death."

Dumbledore glanced down in sorrow. "I almost expected it; it somehow seems karmically appropriate, payment for his past sins. It also seemed as though he could never be truly happy, so it was as well for him to die doing what was right."

After a short silence, Harry asked, "Professor, why did Fawkes bring me here? I mean, I'm glad it gives you the peace it does, but I can't understand why he would bring me back in time, take all these risks, just for that reason."

"Again, Harry, phoenixes know the 'right' thing to do. How did Fawkes know to come to you in the Chamber of Secrets? He simply knew. There are many things about phoenixes that we do not truly understand. You may rest assured that he would not act in any way that was not for the good.

"As to his exact purpose, he may not even know precisely; as in the Chamber, it is simply the best thing to do. But I have one suspicion that may shed a little light... Fawkes, what do you think?"

Fawkes, who had perched on the stand near Dumbledore's desk, promptly flew over to the desk and perched on Harry's forearm. Smiling, Harry lifted his arm up a little to get a better view; Fawkes did not move.

Dumbledore also smiled. "I thought as much. Fawkes has been 'my' phoenix, inasmuch as one can own a phoenix, which one cannot. Phoenixes are very peaceful and sensitive creatures, and with their teleporting abilities, cannot be captured. They choose whom they accompany, and I was honored to have Fawkes as my companion for many years. As I hoped he would, he will now look after you. It is in keeping with their character; phoenixes are fiercely loyal to the one they are with, and you have been no less loyal to me over the

years... even when I was not as deserving of such loyalty as I might wish to be. Fawkes now rewards you, and me, by switching that allegiance to you, now that I am soon to be gone. Be selective in what you ask him for; phoenixes usually only involve themselves in human affairs in matters of great importance. But if something is of great importance to you, though it might not be to others, he will likely oblige you. Never take him for granted, and always keep in mind that his presence is an honor.”

Staring at Fawkes, Harry nodded. “I will, Professor. Thank you. But I’m wondering, it’s been over a year since you died, and Fawkes hasn’t been heard from all that time. But as soon as I went back in time one year—me and half of the DA members, it’s a long story—on an island in the South Pacific, Fawkes was waiting for me, ready to take me here. Why not just join me after you died? Did he need to mourn?”

“No, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “The reason, I am sure, lies in what you possessed then but now, do not.” At Harry’s blank look, Dumbledore extended a long finger, pointing at Harry’s scar. “The Horcrux. If you have killed them all, you know that nothing less than evil incarnate lies in each one. As I said, phoenixes are sensitive. Much as he may have wished to, Fawkes could not have spent time near you consistently while you remained burdened with the Horcrux inside your head. He could not tolerate its presence for long periods of time. He endured it long enough to help you in the Chamber, for example, but the longer he endures such a thing, the harder it is for him. Even though in the Chamber it was relatively inactive, since Voldemort had not yet returned, he could still sense its presence. When I had the one that cost me my hand, he was nowhere to be found. If you have gone back in time—and I would love to hear the story, but I fear we have not the time for it—then it means that the time he met you was his first opportunity to do so with you in a Horcrux-less state. Was it not?”

Harry slowly nodded. “Yes, it was. And it makes sense. But I still don’t understand why he brought me here.”

Now Dumbledore regarded Fawkes. “I do not know, Harry. All I can tell you is, while it may take one month, one year, or ten years, one

day you will know. You will look back and say, if Fawkes had not done that, such-and-such would have happened, and how fortunate it is that it did not. I suspect that it is partly for my peace of mind, Fawkes's kind good-bye present to me. It may in part be to allow me to explain this to you, though I am not telling you anything you could not find in a book. But I am sure there is a reason."

Harry was suddenly conscious that in a way this was Fawkes's gift to him as well, a chance to talk to the living Dumbledore, not the portrait, one last time. "Professor," he said, speaking slowly, "I know... that you set me on this task, finding the Horcruxes... knowing that it would end in my death, and that you felt you couldn't tell me." Harry could see surprise on Dumbledore's face, and remembered that he would not know this if not for having seen Snape's memories, something that Dumbledore didn't know about. "I just wanted to say, I understand why you did it. If I'd been in your position, I might have done the same thing. I'm sure you weren't happy to do it."

Dumbledore looked very affected. "That, my dear boy, is the understatement of the century. It broke my heart. I did tell Severus, who seemed to sense a coldness on my part. I chose not to share my feelings with him, but it pained me greatly. Harry... there is something I should tell you, now that we are both gone, about Severus, why he did what he did—"

"My mother," interrupted Harry, who went on to explain having seen Snape's memories.

Dumbledore nodded, then looked at a timepiece. "We have ten minutes. I do feel as though I used him somewhat, perhaps unjustly; one could say I manipulated his feelings. At the same time, however, I feel as though I was giving him a reason to do the right thing, when the easier thing to do would have been to follow the path he had been following."

"I guess we all do what we think is right," mused Harry.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow thoughtfully. "Interesting. Some people arguably do not—when a wizard turns toward darkness, is he doing it because he thinks it is 'right'? Because it suits the darkness

in his heart? Or, as in the case of one like Bellatrix Lestrange, because she is arguably mentally ill? But on the other hand, some might define 'right' not as what is good or best, as we might, but as what is best for them at that time, or what their wounded ego tells them to do. Perhaps it feels 'right' to them.

"Well, the time Fawkes has given us is almost gone. I want to say, Harry, that this time has meant a lot to me. I depart knowing the future is in safe hands. Do not worry; all will go as it should."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry, emotion rising. "It meant a lot to me too. Even if Fawkes did it for only that reason, I think it would be enough."

"I agree, of course. And Harry... as Auror Leader... trust your intuition. I do not mean in preference to facts or ethics, but where facts and ethics provide insufficient guidance. Distrust your ego, your pride. If you feel your pride demands such-and-such behavior, that is reason to give even more careful examination to whether such-and-such behavior should really be done. More often than not, I believe, it will turn out that it should not. And please keep in mind what I said after Voldemort came back—"

"To do what is difficult and right, not what's easy and wrong," Harry quoted. "I remember."

Dumbledore nodded. "Of course, since you are Auror Leader, it means that you have done the most difficult and right thing that can be done," he said solemnly. "I hope you will model such behavior for society. The more people do that, the better off we all will be."

"I'll do my best," said Harry as they both stood.

"It is difficult to say goodbye, Harry," said Dumbledore heavily; Harry thought he saw tears behind Dumbledore's eyes. "I would very much like to believe that I will see you again." He extended a hand.

Remembering King's Cross, Harry smiled as he shook the hand warmly. "I believe you will. Be well, Albus."

“And you, my young friend,” responded Dumbledore, as Fawkes hovered next to Harry, tail feathers protruding. Not wanting to string out the goodbye, Harry reached out and grasped the tail. Fawkes flapped his wings, they rose,

And they were back at the island, but not the place from which they had departed. Fawkes deposited Harry on the ground, a very large grassy area that Harry estimated to be the size of one or one and a half British Muggle football pitches. He’d been told of this part of the island by the Leader portraits, and had in turn told Kingsley a few days before they’d left. It was where Harry intended to set up the shelters, establish the common area for eating outdoors, and conduct practices.

“Harry!” shouted Hermione and a few others. The group, bags and crates in tow, were approaching his location.

“Oh, good, you found it,” said Harry. “How long have I been gone?” Those at the back hurried forward to see and hear Harry.

“About an hour,” said Kingsley. “What happened?”

Harry would have preferred to wait until they were all settled in, but he could understand their curiosity and concern. “He took me back to talk to Dumbledore, on the day he died.”

Many people gaped. “Further back in time?” Ernie gasped. “Isn’t that dangerous?” Harry saw a very concerned look on Kingsley’s face, but Kingsley said nothing.

“Dumbledore assured me, more than once, that nothing would change,” Harry told them. “He also said that Fawkes wouldn’t have done it if it would change the timeline.”

“Can you take his word for that?” Ernie persisted. “I mean, he was about to die... could he have just wanted to see you, and asked Fawkes to go to the future and get you—“

“He wouldn’t risk the timeline like that for selfish reasons!” said Harry firmly.

“But, I was going to say, maybe he persuaded himself that it wasn’t risky when it really was. Did you tell him anything?”

Becoming slightly irritated by Ernie’s tone, Harry answered the question anyway. “He asked; I told him everything.”

Ernie’s mouth fell open. “And you don’t think it’s possible that a man who’s about to die might get cold feet, and use the information to change things around? Who wouldn’t be tempted to do that? That’s an enormous risk to take!”

Harry took a deep breath, struggling not to lash out at Ernie. Control your emotions at all times, the Leader portraits had said. Easy for them to say, Harry now thought. About to point out that he knew things that Ernie didn’t, Harry suddenly had another idea. Turning to his left, he asked, “Hermione, what do you think?” As he spoke, Fawkes settled on Harry’s right shoulder.

Smiling a little, gesturing at the phoenix, she said, “I think Fawkes is giving an opinion, right now. But my answer is that even if you don’t trust Dumbledore,” she glanced at Ernie, “you can trust Fawkes. Phoenixes are well known for doing the right thing, and he just wouldn’t have done this if he thought Dumbledore was going to abuse it. Of course, if Dumbledore was the kind of person who would do that, Fawkes wouldn’t have been with him in the first place. I’ve read about phoenixes, and they only stay with people who have a very high moral grounding. So, while it’s not 100% risk-free, I’m comfortable with what happened.”

Wondering if others would think she was defending Harry only out of friendship, he asked, “If you didn’t agree with me, you’d say so, right?”

Surprised and amused, she responded, “You’ve met me, right?”

This got some chuckles, including from Harry. “Just making sure.”

“What did you talk about?” asked Padma.

Harry shook his head. "Look, I'll tell you about it later, but right now we've got a lot to do. So, let's get going on that. Tents should go over here, twelve in all, two rows of six..."

* * * * *

Having left in the evening but arrived in the morning, local time, they were starting to get tired by mid-afternoon, after several hours spent setting things up. Eight of the tents would be Auror quarters, the fifteen trainees plus Hestia. One would be shared by Luna and Cho, who not being Auror trainees wouldn't have their living arrangements randomized; one would go to Kingsley, and one to Harry. The last one would be used as storage, and as an indoor group eating and meeting space in case of rain. For the most part, group activities would be held outdoors.

A long table, not very fancy as it was made for all weather conditions, was set up about ten meters from the tents, very close to the food preparation area. It was slightly oblong in the center, so everyone could see everyone else even though it wasn't a circle. After most basic things were set up, most everyone was hungry, and the miniaturized, pre-cooked food was taken out. Each package contained a specific set of dishes; this group was Chicken Kiev, scalloped potatoes, and sliced carrots in sauce. Dishes and implements would be conjured, a skill currently possessed by Kingsley, Hestia, Angelina, and Seamus.

They sat at the table, ten on each side. Harry made an effort to be among the first to sit, and chose the middle; he didn't want to be seen as choosing to sit near anyone in particular. As it happened, however, Ron and Hermione sat on either side of him. I guess it's natural, he thought, all those years at Hogwarts, they might do it without thinking about it.

"This stuff isn't as bad as I was afraid it would be," commented Corner after his first bite.

"No, pretty good, actually," agreed Dean.

"It should be, it's fairly expensive," said Kingsley. "I had a hard time trying to get together the supplies for this mission, especially this part. The Ministry Budget Department didn't want to let go of the money for this when I wouldn't explain what I wanted it for. 22,000 of these meals isn't a small amount, of food or of money."

Ron spoke up after finishing a bite. "I thought the Minister could do pretty much anything he wanted."

Kingsley grunted. "Pretty much, yes. The exception is when it comes to spending money. For that, the Minister has to have some real clout, which I seem to lack these days."

"Couldn't you have had Harry talk to them, get him to get them to do it?"

"I would've if I'd had to. For him, they'd have done it. But I'd rather have Harry using his muscle at the Ministry as little as possible. There were other options, as this island apparently has a convenient livestock section, though I haven't seen it yet."

"I could have sworn I heard some clucking in the distance," volunteered Cho. A few others agreed.

"And other things, so we may not have to use these meals at all," said Kingsley. "At least, I hope, though we had to come to the island as if there was no food here at all. I took out a line of credit from the Bank of the Phoenix just in case, got the food on credit with the understanding that it could be returned, though there'd be a return fee of 1% for every day I had it before returning it."

Some people laughed. "That's cheating," chuckled George. "They didn't know you were going back in time."

"I'd prefer to call it savvy negotiating," responded Kingsley with a grin. "Agreeing to that helped me get a price of a half a Galleon a unit; usually, they go for a whole Galleon each."

Ron whistled. "That's not cheap."

"I wish I'd known about these," said Harry. "I'd have used my Gringotts money and bought a few hundred for us to use while we were on the run." After a slight pause, noting Hermione's slightly askance look, he added, "In no way am I criticizing the cooking you did for us, of course."

She didn't look mollified. "In no way are you praising it, either." Ron stifled a giggle.

"You did a very good job with what you had, and I will be forever grateful," he said, trying to convey as much sincerity as possible. He saw some amused grins around the table.

"We'll talk about it later," she said without expression, but Harry was sure he saw a smile in her eyes.

"So," said Ron to Kingsley, "did your buying for this trip get noticed?"

Kingsley nodded. "Trying to keep something that's on a big scale secret is pretty tough. Nobody knows what we're doing, but they know that something's going on. Especially the food and water, some of the other supplies... and I don't think the Foreign Ministry staff is going to keep quiet about being pushed out of their own Departures Lounge for over a day. Who knows, with all that information, somebody might actually be able to guess it."

"The most reasonable guess, from the outside," suggested Hestia, "is some sort of disaster relief mission, combined with Auror assistance. Of course, no known foreign situation fits that description. So, there'll probably be a lot of wild guessing when we get back."

"What will we say?" asked Parvati.

"You, and I, will say nothing," answered Hestia, "unless specifically authorized by the Leader. As a general matter, Aurors don't talk to the media."

"I meant, when asked by friends," Parvati clarified.

Hestia exchanged a glance with Kingsley. "I'm sorry, but I can't talk about what I do," they said in unison. "That's a phrase," added Hestia, "that you'll be using a lot. With friends, relatives, even parents and future spouses. Nobody is supposed to know about what you do, even if most of the time it's utterly ordinary and unremarkable."

"What will Harry say," Parvati persisted, "when people he runs across in Diagon Alley ask him?"

"It's up to him," said Hestia. "Probably some variation on that, except as the Leader, he's not bound by any rule on this. But, Harry doesn't strike me as the type to blab."

"No," agreed Ron, "he's pretty good at keeping his mouth shut."

"Thank you, Ron," said Harry sarcastically.

"No problem, mate."

"Harry," asked Luna, "will you always be eating with us?"

He looked baffled. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, you're the Leader," she pointed out. "Leaders don't always eat with the troops, or at least that's the impression I get, from history."

Ginny chuckled. "I remember you asking about that once. 'Did the leaders eat with their troops?' Professor Binns was kind of annoyed, like he didn't want to be bothered with something like that. But I thought it was an interesting question. It might give some information about what the leader was like."

"Yes, that was part of the idea," agreed Luna. "Also, I was just curious."

"It is a very good question, actually," agreed Kingsley.

"There is stuff about this in the Auror Leader chronicles," said Harry, having decided to use the phrase every time he referred to the portraits' comments. He wished they weren't so fussy about not being

known publicly, but he would respect their wishes. “Different Leaders had different opinions about it, and if there’s a consensus, it’s that it depends on what feels best for that particular Leader. Some of them were more formal and aloof, and they didn’t spend much time with their Aurors, certainly not eating with them. Others thought it was important to spend time with them, to build a relationship. As for us, this is a unique situation. After all, I shared a dormitory with four of you, was the same year as more than half, and so forth. So, I’d think it would be weird if I suddenly started doing things separately from you. Now, there does have to be some... separateness, I guess, and that’s why I’ll have a tent of my own. But, as much as I can, I want to be with the rest of you. The... chronicles did say that the more time the Leader spends with the Aurors, the more tolerant he has to be of disagreements, sarcastic comments, things like that. He can’t expect them not to be themselves. But I think I’ll be okay with that.”

Ron grinned. “I’m sure we’ll be testing you out on that. Certainly George will, anyway.”

Harry shrugged. “George is a special case.”

“I’ve always thought so,” George agreed. “So, Harry, are you going to tell us the story?”

He spent the next fifteen minutes relating the story in as much detail as he could remember it. Near the end, he saw Hermione getting a little misty on his right. “Obviously, I still don’t know exactly why Fawkes did it. We may never know. But I’m glad he did. I think Dumbledore felt guilty about what he did with me, and I had a chance to tell him that I knew and understood. I didn’t say the exact words, but it was like I forgave him, and I could tell it meant a lot to him.”

“What about the timeline?” asked Ernie. “Even if Dumbledore didn’t do anything wrong, there’s still the other aspect. You said there shouldn’t be any other... distortions of space-time once we’re already back, and the first thing that happens is he takes you further back. If what you said is true, wouldn’t that be a problem?”

Harry shrugged. “Keep in mind that I’m extremely far from an expert on the subject, I’m just saying what I was told. As I told you,

Dumbledore said more than once that if it would have caused any problems, Fawkes wouldn't have done it. So, I'm banking on that."

Ernie raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

Harry nodded. "Really."

Harry didn't speak for the next twenty minutes as there was an explosion of conversation, points debated back and forth. Everyone spoke at least once except for Harry, Kingsley, and Hestia. The consensus seemed to be that phoenixes could be trusted, and the conversation turned to Harry's new connection to Fawkes, who had been seen a number of times near Harry throughout the day. "It's kind of nice for you that you get to have a pet," Dean remarked, and was instantly greeted with several retorts to the effect that phoenixes were most definitely not pets. "Well, how was I supposed to know?" responded an irritated Dean. "We never studied them."

Mock-sadly, Seamus shook his head. "Among the many sad disadvantages of the Muggle-born." Dean rolled his eyes.

Harry didn't think it over; he just knew he didn't like it. "I'd rather nobody made comments about Muggle-borns."

"Hey, he's my mate, I can say it to him if I want to," retorted Seamus.

"When you're alone, I don't care what you say. In the group, I don't want that word used unless there's some very good reason."

"Hey, c'mon, I've got nothing against them, I'm half myself," responded Seamus defensively. "I'm not using the other word, I'm not some kind of bigot."

"I'm not saying you are," said Harry. "I'm just saying, this is how it's going to be."

"Harry, is this because of Hermione?" asked Dean curiously. "Because I really don't care."

“It’s not because of Hermione. It’s because of what happened to Muggle-borns over the past year. Persecuted, wands taken, jobs lost, falsely accused, and a whole lot more. Hermione and I saw some of it with our own eyes, and Ron’s heard lots of firsthand stories. Look, I know nobody here is prejudiced, and Seamus, I absolutely didn’t mean to suggest otherwise. I’m just very sensitive to the idea that we get divided at all based on that. I’d rather live in a society where that was so unimportant that nobody thought to comment on it.”

There was silence, as nobody seemed to know what to say. After a few more seconds, Luna asked, “Harry, do you ever feel like you were a Muggle-born?”

A dozen heads looked at Luna as if she had asked a very strange question, but Harry slowly nodded. “I had never thought about it exactly like that, but yes, I think so.”

“Why?” asked Seamus, puzzled. “You may not be a pure-blood, but both your parents were wizards.”

Understanding dawned on Ron. “Because you didn’t know you were a wizard until you went to Hogwarts.”

Harry looked at Luna with a great deal of respect. “Exactly. Nobody was ever rude to me like they are to Muggle-borns, but I always had the same gaps in my knowledge that Muggle-borns did—not knowing things that all wizards know, like about phoenixes—and having the same Muggle cultural knowledge that they did but those born in the wizarding world didn’t. So I suppose I may have felt like one, even if it never occurred to me exactly that way. Now, I don’t think that’s why I’m sensitive about it—“

Luna spoke during a slight pause. “But it makes you able to understand how they feel, more than the rest of us.”

Again, Harry was impressed by her insight. “Exactly.”

Seamus shook his head. “Wow, I didn’t know that. I mean, you might have said something about it once, when you first got there, but for those of us who grew up in the wizarding world, Harry Potter was

such a household name that it wouldn't occur to most of us that he was anything but a part of the wizarding world. Funny how that is."

About to ask Hermione, Harry realized he didn't want to ask someone who appeared to have a vested interest. "Ron, do you think I'm being too sensitive about this?"

Ron pondered for a few seconds, his expression showing that he found it a difficult question. "Maybe a little, but it's understandable. Probably what got you about what Seamus said were the words 'sad, unfortunate.' Now, obviously we all know that Seamus was just having fun with Dean, but those words may have hit you the wrong way. It is very sad and unfortunate what happens to a lot of Muggle-borns, especially the past year. So... I don't think you need to worry about it; even if you hadn't said anything, you wouldn't have heard it all that much anyway."

Harry nodded. He felt an impulse to reassure Seamus that he hadn't intended any offense, then realized he had already done that, so there was no point in saying it again. A thought popped into his mind, and he decided to change the subject. "Kingsley, did anyone do a timecheck since we got here? Just in case something went wrong and we did actually go back to when I met Dumbledore?"

Kingsley waved his wand. In midair suddenly appeared the words 1997, October, 7, and 15:56:51 appeared. "We're when we should be," he said.

"Just thought it was worth a check. So, we're not doing anything else today, right?"

Kingsley shook his head. "No, the plan was just to use today to get set up, since we've all been up for a while right now, and should be getting tired."

"Okay," agreed Harry. Turning to the group, he went on, "So, we arrange quarters, do some unpacking—don't do too much, of course, since you'll be moving once every week or two—read, hang out, whatever you want. Wakeup time will be sunrise—about 5:30, I think it was—and will be every day. There's no enforced bedtime, it'll just

be expected that everyone will schedule things to make sure they get enough sleep. The time to stop doing anything that might disturb your roommate is eight hours before sunrise or when your roommate wants to go to sleep, whichever is later.

"Now, so you can get set up, let's see about the first-week roommate situation. I've learned a spell that randomizes things, and I'm pretty sure it works. I just wave the wand over this paper," he said, having produced the paper with the list of 16 names from his robe, "and point it at each tent twice. Number one..." He pointed at the first tent, and the names came out, "Longbottom" and "Jones." Neville and Hestia exchanged a glance. He pointed at the second tent: to his great surprise, "Granger" was followed by "R. Weasley." "Are you sure you didn't fix that thing?" joked Seamus amid general commentary.

"Any rules about what goes on in the tents?" asked Dean with a smile.

Harry feigned ignorance. "Well, no violence."

Ron wagged a finger at Hermione. "See, you heard him. No more of that."

A few people laughed; she rolled her eyes. "Very mature, Ron."

Harry shrugged. "I thought it was funny." He continued pointing; next was "Pd. Patil" and "Finnegan", followed by "Corner" and "Boot." Harry was again surprised when the next combination was "Finch-Fletchley" and "McMillan." "Just like at Hogwarts," Justin commented.

The quarters were rounded out with combinations of Ginny-Parvati, George-Dean, and Jordan-Johnson. Harry's spell affixed the names to each tent, so everyone would remember where to go, as all tents looked the same. "Tomorrow," he announced, "after breakfast, we go out and explore the island, all twenty of us together. "We'll start training in the afternoon, and also set up fishing equipment. Just for tonight, nobody goes out past the grass area. That's all for now," he concluded. Half of the people headed for their tents, and half stayed at the table talking. Harry walked to his tent and entered.

He hadn't actually been in one; it was very much like a Muggle hotel room. Not that he'd ever been in one, but he'd seen them on television. It was about the same size; the main difference was the design. The two beds were separated by a wall which extended only a little further than the beds themselves, and the rest of the room was open space with a simple sofa, two chairs, two end tables, and a coffee table. Amazing, he thought, that it just looked like a tent from the outside. An ingenious touch, he felt, was that the bathroom was behind the beds, also separated by a wall, and each person could reach the bathroom by leaving his bed, walking to his right (in the case of the bed on the right), and making a 180 degree turn. In this way, neither had to walk past the other's bed to reach the bathroom in the middle of the night, and both had equal access.

Harry lay on his bed, feeling a need to relax, and relaxed so much that he nearly dropped off to sleep. He came back to full consciousness on hearing a knock at the door. He pointed a wand at the door, it swung open, and Kingsley entered. "Just out of curiosity, can these doors be locked?" asked Harry.

"No," said Kingsley, who came in and pulled up a chair to sit not far from Harry's bed. "Reconsidering your answer to Dean's question?"

Harry chuckled. "No. They're adults, and I'm not going to try to tell them what to do. I know you said a few days ago that a few of them are bound to do something unwise, but I haven't changed my mind about that. If they do, they do."

Kingsley nodded. "Just wondering."

"So, you're here as the Devil's Advocate?"

"Yes. I was thinking, it'd probably be useful for you to try to guess what I'm going to say. Being familiar with the arguments against your actions seems like it wouldn't be a bad idea."

Harry thought for a minute. "You think I shouldn't have gone back with Fawkes."

"Not exactly."

“But close.” Harry thought again, and finally shrugged. “I give up.”

“I understand the ‘we trust the phoenixes’ angle,’ and as the group ended up deciding, it’s a pretty decent reason. My main criticism would be that you didn’t give the decision enough time.”

“Fawkes was doing that thing with his tail—“

“You had already decided to go at that point,” Kingsley pointed out. “You had no reason to think it was urgent.”

“Well, it turned out okay,” Harry pointed out.

Kingsley looked at Harry with disappointment, as if he had expected better of Harry. “When you talk to the Devil’s Advocate, ‘it turned out okay’ doesn’t end the discussion, nor is it any defense for questionable decisions. And I don’t mean this one was, but I mean, in general. What I’m about to say is important to understand. There are some things you’re not going to know, because you’re so young. I don’t mean facts, I mean things you learn from experience. One of them is that you can make a bad decision and get a bad result. You can make a bad decision and get a good result. You can make a good decision and get a bad result, or a good result. Granted, a bad decision is more likely to result in a bad outcome, and the same with good, but not always. Chance can affect the outcome. Things you didn’t know and had no way to know can affect the outcome.”

Harry pondered this, then asked, “Then how can you judge the decision, if not by the outcome?”

“You do it by analyzing the facts and the situation that existed when the decision was being made,” explained Kingsley. “Not only the facts that the decision-maker knew, but the ones he could have known, or should have known.

“For example, you said in that Witch Weekly interview a few weeks ago that I shouldn’t have been blamed for the nuclear blast that killed most of the Aurors, because I couldn’t possibly have known that the goblins would blow up Gringotts like that. That was kind of you, but

the fact is, I could have. I've lived in the Muggle world, I knew about nuclear weapons. One could easily argue that before sending every Auror but one into the same place, I should have considered any and every way in which they could be in danger, when in fact, I only considered magical ones. Now, it's true that nobody would have imagined that the goblins would destroy Gringotts, their home for many years, and nobody would imagine that they would know enough and have enough interaction with the human Muggle world to get ahold of a nuclear weapon. So, there are many who would not blame me. But the point is that I could have imagined it. I had the information, I had the imaginative capacity. I simply didn't."

Harry listened somberly, wondering what hell Kingsley had put himself through for what had happened. "What they did was so bizarre, so irrational... you shouldn't blame yourself for what happened."

Kingsley met Harry's eyes. "As I hope you never find out, but probably will, what you should blame yourself for and what you do aren't the same thing, aren't governed by rationality. Luckily for me, most people don't know enough about the Muggle world to understand that I could have known."

"But they were going to remove you as Minister. Why would they do that when as far as they knew, it was something you couldn't have known?"

"They, the citizens and some of the political class, will judge you and me by the outcomes in our respective areas of responsibility, whether our actions had anything to do with them or not. My point was that when I offer feedback in my role as Devil's Advocate, it'll be based on what you could or should have known when you made the decision, not how it turned out."

Harry nodded, reminding himself not to offer as a defense for his actions that it had turned out fine. "I understand."

"Okay. Now, as I was saying, even before Fawkes indicated any urgency, you'd already made the decision to go. Now, sometimes there'll be things that you know that I don't, and you'll have to tell me

about those. I knew the general facts about the Chamber, but I'd assumed that Dumbledore had sent Fawkes to you; I didn't know that he came by himself. I can see why that would give you a very strong trust in phoenixes, or in Fawkes especially. Still, it's hard to see where it would have hurt you to take a few minutes to think about it. By the way, did you know that phoenixes could travel through time?"

Harry shook his head. "The only reason I even knew they could teleport is that I saw him do it once."

"Yes, well, unfortunately, I was unconscious at the time," said Kingsley wryly. "I understand it was quite impressive."

Harry grinned at the memory. "Anyway," Kingsley continued, "that was in the category of things you could have known but didn't know. Now, I don't expect you to be a walking encyclopedia, no one does, and among the reasons I wouldn't blame you for not knowing is that I shoved you into this. There's a reason that seventeen-year-olds never take the test. It's simply a factual matter that you could have known but didn't, but it does underscore the fact that the more you know, the better decisions you'll make."

Harry nodded. "The portraits have really been after me about that. They're always telling me to study this or study that."

"Or, if you don't have the information, the next best thing is to know where to get it."

"You mean, Hermione."

Kingsley smiled a little. "In your case, yes. When we get back, you want to get in contact with scientists, intellectuals, and so forth. If the Auror Leader needs information or advice, people will be happy to give it."

"Won't they just want something in return? Like, I'll do you a favor if you do me one?"

“Some will,” agreed Kingsley. “Some will give the information as a public service. You’ll have to work out who belongs to which group, and whether the information or advice is important enough to do them a favor. As for here, you already know that Hermione knows a lot of things, though of course not everything—”

“Seems like it, sometimes,” Harry mused.

“But it would be a good idea to find out more about all of your Aurors. You already know them to various extents, but there are certainly things about them you don’t know. Maybe one is a history buff, maybe another likes to collect obscure spells. Maybe one loves horticulture, and that could come in handy sometime. As Leader, you never know when such information could be important. In the situation earlier, a reasonable question would have been, who here knows anything about phoenixes? Before making a decision, get as much information as reasonably possible, in a reasonable time frame. Also, your Aurors will want to help, and will appreciate that you called on them to give their expertise. Everyone has an ego, though it’s best not to make decisions based on it. As Dumbledore mentioned, according to what you said.”

“I understand.”

There was silence for a few seconds. “Well,” said Kingsley, “that may be as much as you can absorb at once, so we’ll let this go here. That ought to give you enough to think about for a while.

“I guess so,” Harry agreed. “Thanks.”

Kingsley stood, moved the chair in which he’d been sitting to where he’d found it, and exited. Harry lay back down, his head swimming. I was so sure, he thought, that when I took Fawkes’s tail I was doing the right thing. Maybe I was, but it looks very different now, after all that stuff Kingsley said. The Leaders had said stuff like that, but this was more specific, and applicable to a particular situation; the Leaders’ advice had been more general.

Do I really have it in me to take all this kind of stuff into account before making a decision? I’ve always just done what I thought was

best, and it's usually worked out. Yeah, except you went to the Ministry two and a half years ago, and now Sirius is dead. He winced at the memory; he wondered if it would always haunt him. Dumbledore had taken the blame, but part of him knew better. That was bad decision-making, he told himself. Kingsley's saying I should slow down, get information, think it through. I guess I can do that, it's just hard to change.

He mulled this over for a little while, then decided he needed to stop thinking about it. He got up and walked outside. A half-dozen people were still at the main table talking, and he saw Neville and Ginny taking a walk in the field. He walked to the second tent, pulled back the flap, took a step in, and knocked on the door. "Come in," shouted Hermione after a slight pause.

She and Ron were sitting on the sofa. "I hope I'm not bothering you," said Harry, imagining they'd been kissing.

"No, it's fine," she said, as Ron nodded. "What's up?"

He'd come over for a different reason, but found himself answering, "I don't know, I just feel stressed." He described his conversation with Kingsley. "I just feel like... I don't know if I can always stop and think of all these things that Kingsley says I should, the portraits say I should. And what if I don't, and..."

"Somebody dies because of it?" asked Hermione gently.

Taking a deep breath, Harry nodded. He hadn't been consciously aware that he was thinking that, but as soon as she said it, he realized it was true. Ron and Hermione exchanged a look that suggested neither knew quite what to say. "Did this ever come up with the Auror Leader portraits?"

He shook his head. "They said things like, your decisions will have life-or-death consequences, but this particular thing didn't come up. Now I wish I could talk to them about it, but I can't, for a year."

“Isn’t it pretty unlikely that any life-or-death decisions will have to be made in the next year?” asked Ron. “You could consider this a time where you have a chance to get used to the idea.”

“Couldn’t you talk to Kingsley about it?” asked Hermione.

“I wouldn’t do that,” said Harry emphatically. “He feels responsible for those forty deaths, then I go and complain to him that I might one day feel responsible for people’s deaths? That... wouldn’t be good.”

“I can see that,” she agreed reluctantly. “But another way to look at it is that this has been the case since you started at Hogwarts, you, we, were always involved in dangerous things. Ron or I could have died more than once, but we always chose to go into danger with you, because we thought it was right. These people, by becoming Aurors, are choosing that too. They know there’s danger, and they know you’re not perfect. I don’t know what else...” she trailed off, with an apologetic and helpless shrug.

Ron’s expression was more serious than Harry had even seen on his friend. “I do get it, Harry, at least as well as I can hope to. Last year—well, this year, but you know what I mean—when I left you two, I imagined all kinds of things. I imagined that one or both of you might die, a death that could have been prevented if I’d been there. If that had happened, I’d have felt horribly responsible for that. So I understand, at least a little. But my feeling is, and I hate to say this, that there’s nothing to be done about it. I have a feeling that if you could ask the Leader portraits, they’d say that this is part of the deal, something that can’t be avoided if you’re responsible for people in this way. Probably every Leader went through this kind of thing, and just dealt with it as best they could.”

“It’s in history too,” added Hermione, “and literature. In Shakespeare, kings worried about the men who would die in battle the next day. I suspect that it would be very strange if you didn’t feel this way. But I do think Ron is right, it’s best right now to try to put it aside if you can, and just focus on the time on the island. Worry about tomorrow tomorrow.”

Staring straight ahead, Harry gave a tiny nod to show that he'd been listening. Not very helpful, he thought, but what else could they say? "Thank you, both of you," he finally said. "Maybe I just need to talk about it once in a while, and you're right, Ron, there shouldn't be many important decisions coming up very soon. I hope, at least."

He paused, then changed the subject. "By the way, Hermione, you haven't gotten all the books out yet, have you?" He had charged her with the task of gathering some of the books in the Auror library, whichever she thought most useful, and reducing them to take to the island.

"No, there hasn't been time. Why?"

"I want to have a look at the encyclopedia."

"What topic?"

"Phoenixes."

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 3, The Chess Game: Harry tries to turn a game of chess into an object lesson for the Auror trainees, but George's taunting leads to conflict between him, Ron, and Harry.

From Chapter 3: Again, Ron's position was starting to fall apart under Harry's organized onslaught. George spoke again. "Wow, Ron's playing like he's under a Confundus curse—"

Harry had had enough. "Cut it out, Malfoy," he snapped, glancing up at George. He heard a collective intake of breath, knowing that everyone was surprised at his words, even as he stared at the board.

Chapter 3

The Chess Game

The next day, the group spent the first half of the day walking all over the island, finding a freshwater stream, plenty of trees and plants yielding fresh fruits, vegetables, and nuts, some of which the group gathered for later consumption. They also discovered two magically separated environments, each about the size of two football fields, containing swine and fowl. Harry explained, as it had been explained to him by the 'Auror Leader chronicles', that the island had been magically enhanced and altered specifically for human habitation, and in such a way that the ecosystems wouldn't become unbalanced even if humans were not present for decades. One particular Leader, the fifth, had had a strong interest in ecosystems, and he had made it a long-term project to shield the island from outside view and create self-perpetuating habitats. It had been the responsibility of each Leader since then to make sure that all was well.

In the afternoon, Luna and Cho were left on their own to set up the food preparation system, while everyone else gathered on the grass for the first Auror training. Harry decided to stand with the trainees, since in a sense he was being trained as well. Kingsley faced the trainees; Hestia stood off to one side, reflecting her status as a kind of assistant to the trainer. It was a perfect day: blue sky, temperature in the mid-70s, a light breeze. Harry remembered that the last time he'd stood on grass and listened to a lecture or practiced was in Japan, where it had been summer, with high heat and humidity. This is much better, he thought with amusement.

"Okay," said Kingsley, in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone but not too loud. "First of all, we'll be taking five-to-ten minute breaks every hour, so you can relax or use the bathroom."

"Bathroom?" repeated Padma in surprise.

"By which I mean, one of the many trees or bushes out there," said Kingsley humorously. "I suggest that everyone choose one location to use, so you don't get into conflicts over who goes where."

“What about the women?” protested Parvati, clearly unhappy with this turn of events.

“See that willow over there?” asked Hestia, pointing. “That’s mine. Don’t anybody take it.” Her tone was matter-of-fact, making it clear to Parvati that women were to be treated no differently than men.

With his Auror Leader-enhanced hearing, Harry heard Parvati mumble, “Nobody said anything about this.” She said it so quietly that Harry assumed she’d intended for no one else to hear.

“Early on,” announced Kingsley, “we’ll be spending some time on practical things like conjuring, so the four of us who can don’t have to be doing it all the time. The emphasis will be on eating and drinking implements, and then we’ll move on to chairs. In the meantime, standing for long periods of time isn’t a bad thing, because as Aurors, there will be a lot of standing involved.

“Before we do any magic, I want to talk about what’s expected of Aurors. I think Harry’s already done that to some extent, but for a few minutes, I want you to hear it from someone with years of experience as an Auror.

“What Harry did, in order to become Auror Leader, is the extreme example of what could be asked of an Auror. Faced with the choice of saving his loved ones and letting tens of thousands of wizards die, he chose to save society while having to watch his close friends and family die. The test, of course, happens in one’s mind, but the person being tested believes it’s real. I myself took it, and failed. So did Professor Dumbledore; most people do. So I know how hard it is.

“Luckily, this sort of thing—especially on such a large scale—almost never happens in real life, but it theoretically could. Once in the test, and once in real life, Harry made excruciating choices to do what was right, what was best for society. Because of that, Harry has the deepest respect and admiration of all of society—to some extent, believe it or not, even the criminal element—and it’s well-deserved.” Harry stared forward, not looking at any heads turned in his direction, wondering where Kingsley was going with this.

“You all will be Aurors. At least, that’s what we hope. It could still happen that somebody is found, or finds themselves, unsuitable for some reason. Whatever that reason might be, it very likely won’t be a lack of bravery, since you all fought in the Battle of Hogwarts, united by nothing but your common experiences, and your loyalty to Harry and to each other.

“But an Auror needs more than bravery, and one of the most important attributes for an Auror is morality. Because of what he’s done, Harry has been given great authority. Authority that can’t be overridden by anyone, not even the Minister. Authority that if abused could cause great damage to society. But society is confident that he will not abuse it, and in fact, it is a matter of history that none of the previous fifteen Auror Leaders let down their society in such a way. All retired or passed on with honor.

“Society trusts Aurors as well, and gives them a great deal of authority. An Auror can do something that for most people would be illegal—for example, break into a person’s home and perform a search not previously approved by a magistrate—and not be prosecuted, not accused of a crime. An Auror is not absolutely above the law, but occupies a privileged space in relation to it.

“An Auror, therefore, should strive to the highest standard of morality. Not just the standard demanded by law, which for an Auror would be the absolute minimum standard, but a standard that reflects the high esteem in which Aurors are held by the people. A standard that reflects a desire to be of service to society. A standard which if adhered to, an Auror could be asked questions under Veritaserum and be unable to say anything that would bring shame to him or the Aurors. I do not mean that every Auror achieves this standard all the time, just that it is to be strived for.

“Now, the great enemy of morality is justification. Many of us—many of you, even, despite your youth—have done something we knew was wrong, but were able to justify it to ourselves. Stealing from a rich man is not so bad, because he’s rich. Lying to someone we disrespect is not so bad, because we don’t care what they think of us anyway. Hurting a bad person is okay, because they had it coming. Betraying our spouse... if they never find out, what’s the harm? We

want to think we're good people. If we do something that's normally considered bad, we don't suddenly change our minds about that. 'Oh, maybe I am a bad person after all.' No, we think of a reason why what we did is all right, or at least, not so bad. That can become a habit, a very dangerous one."

Kingsley paused for several seconds, seeming to look everyone over. "Why do we do bad things? Selfish things, things we regret later? Well, we are human, and the reasons are myriad. You should investigate such things, and we will talk about them, because they may be important in your work as Aurors. But the basic cause is what a Muggle psychologist called the id, which can be summed up like this: we want what we want. We do things out of self-interest, because self-interest was part of what pulled us up from the muck of evolution. The strong survived, got the most fertile mates, competed with the others. Self-interest, competition, aggression... they were necessary twenty, fifty, a hundred thousand years ago. They aren't anymore, but they're in our DNA. We're stuck with them. An Auror needs to understand this, to face up to our negative impulses, rather than giving in to them and later justifying the behavior.

"Justification is seductive, because it gives us permission to do things we know deep down we shouldn't do. There is a trap Aurors have fallen into in the past. It goes like this: I'm an Auror, I do what I do to benefit society. I'm a good guy, with good motives, therefore everything I do is for the good. Even if I do something that's normally considered bad, it's good if my objective is good."

"The ends justify the means," recited Hermione, standing a few feet to Harry's right.

"The very next words that were going to come out of my mouth," agreed Kingsley. "Now, sometimes they do. Everything is not always black and white, which is another theme we'll be getting to. But back to this one, another part of this trap is that if it benefits me, and I'm working for society, then it benefits society. This type of thinking can lead to corruption very quickly, and has in the past.

"I don't know if everyone read the article that *Dormus Pinter of Witch Weekly* wrote about Harry a few days after the dementors were

defeated, but Harry went out of his way to say that he wouldn't be accepting anything free from anyone. No meals, no goods, nothing for free, and he was getting dozens and dozens of offers—“

Harry couldn't stop himself from interrupting. “It doesn't hurt to have inherited three million Galleons,” he said dryly. A few trainees chuckled.

Kingsley eyed Harry, his eyes communicating ‘oh, really’ to Harry. “And if you didn't have this money, you would have accepted those things?”

Embarrassed, Harry sighed. “Well... no...”

Kingsley nodded as some trainees again chuckled. “Let's all just keep in mind that false modesty is also not something we should strive for.”

Mildly annoyed, Harry responded, “I was just saying that it wasn't the sacrifice for me that it would have been for some people.”

“Noted. But getting back to the point, it would have been extremely easy for Harry to justify taking such things. He had performed enormous services for society, and many of the people making these offers were motivated by sincere gratitude. But Harry knew how it could appear, and he knew it wouldn't be a good habit to get into. No one told him to do this, he just did it. Now, my purpose here isn't to hold Harry up as a model for you all, and only partly because I'm annoying him right now. It's simply a good example of what I'm trying to get across.

“To briefly summarize: much is expected of those to whom much is given. Now, before I move on, are there any questions or comments?”

After a few seconds of silence, Neville spoke. “Last winter and spring, I spent most of my time in the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts, which could provide everything except food, which as most people now know I got from the Hog's Head. I ran out of money to pay for it pretty quickly, and Aberforth said I could owe him. A month after Voldemort died, I got the money from my grandmother and tried to

pay him, but he said that an anonymous person had already paid my tab. Assuming I was an Auror in that situation, what should I have done?"

Harry tried not to give himself away by changing his expression; Kingsley smiled a little. "I don't know, Neville. I certainly don't have all the answers for questions like that. Let me ask you, Harry, what do you think?"

Harry wished Kingsley hadn't asked him, as he now felt on the spot. He thought for a few seconds, trying to work out how he would answer if he himself had not given Aberforth the money. "Being anonymous makes it a little different thing, since no one's trying to get credit for it, no one wants anything in return. The more money it is, the more you should try not to accept it, especially if it's a really big amount. But eleven Galleons isn't really that much, so I'd think you could accept it, it's not worth the trouble—"

Harry cut himself off as Neville whirled in stunned surprised to face him. "I didn't say how much it was, and that's exactly what it was!"

Cursing himself for his carelessness, Harry knew he'd been caught, and quickly decided not to try to lie. Assuming an expression of false innocence, he shrugged lightly. "Lucky guess."

Kingsley burst into loud laughter as Neville gaped at Harry; other trainees started to laugh as well. "Do as he says, not as he does," joked Seamus.

"This was long before I was Auror Leader," protested Harry. "I wasn't thinking in those kinds of terms. I just... you know, wanted to say thanks for what you did."

Smiling, Neville took a few steps toward Harry. "I ought to smack you," he joked. "I can pay my own tab!"

"Your grandmother can pay it, anyway!" laughed Seamus; Neville gave him a humorous dirty look.

"I didn't mean that you couldn't," said Harry. "People trying to give me things certainly know I can pay for them, they know I've got money. And no smacking the Auror Leader," he added, pointing a finger, mock-sternly, at Neville.

Reaching Harry, Neville threw an arm around him, shaking him a little. "It was very nice of you," he said quietly. More loudly, he added, "And don't do it again!" Shaking his head, he walked back to his spot on the grass.

Kingsley had never stopped laughing, and was now winding down. "Oh, dear," he said. "Lesson for everyone: don't inadvertently betray others' secrets, and definitely, don't betray your own!" This got a lot of laughs as well, and Kingsley paused for a minute to let people get the humor out of their system. "I've given that lecture, or a variant of it, before, but it's never degenerated into hilarity like that one did. But since that's come up, it is worth looking at it from the other side. As the giver here, Harry's motives were very honorable, and as he points out, eleven Galleons isn't a lot. It's a gesture, and I've been on the receiving end of some of them; people mean well. A woman stopped me in Diagon Alley a few months ago and gave me homemade cookies. I thanked her, took them back to the office, and did a magical scan for poison." A few trainees chuckled. "Hey, it's a standard precaution. Aurors are targets as well. The cookies were clean, and my assistant and I enjoyed them. So, I don't mean you have to be an absolute purist. You don't want to offend people with good intentions. What you do need to do is recognize when someone wants something in return or is trying to curry favor, and when it's from their heart. You also need to recognize your own self-interest, and try to take it out of the equation. The more you want what they're offering, the more you need to think about it."

"You need the time to think up a justification," suggested George.

"Well, we hope not," said Kingsley, with a look at George that communicated that there would be a limit to his tolerance of humorous comments. "Now, accepting gifts is a small thing, but small things can lead to big things. You just need to keep it in mind.

“Now, for some more practical aspects of being an Auror. One of the very most important things is psychology, understanding how people work. Why is that? One important reason is that wizarding society is very small, between eighty and ninety thousand witches and wizards; this would be the total population of a mid-sized Muggle city. I’ve been an Auror for twenty-seven years... well, I should say, I was an Auror for twenty-seven years. I’m not now, of course, though I still tend to think like that. I’d say I personally know hundreds of people, maybe a thousand, and I have some knowledge of thousands more. This is not unusual for an Auror. People committing crimes will sometimes be people you know, and it’s important to understand them. The guy who’s an assistant at a local shop, who you’ve known for twenty years, might end up being a criminal. You never would have thought he’d do it, but he did. You’ll know the prominent people better, but it’s good to know as many people as possible. Is Madame Malkin a temperamental harpy, or a kind, helpful boss?”

Before Kingsley had a chance to continue, Parvati jumped in. “Oh, she’s very nice, Lavender and I would often go to her shop, and...” Seeing Kingsley’s expression, she trailed off. “Oh. It was a rhetorical question. Sorry.”

Harry grinned, as did several others. “Yes, it was,” said Kingsley wryly. “But thank you for that. Knowing that kind of thing can be helpful. Anyway, those people or their assistants can be very helpful. If they like you or trust you, they may give you tips on people who came through their shops, who seemed suspicious for whatever reason. Most of the time it’ll be nothing, just people who gave them a bad impression. But once in a while...”

After a pause, Kingsley went on, “Okay, enough of that for now. Let’s get to magic. I’m sure that after being in the DA, you all have the basics down, but it never hurts to be sure. We’ll spend the next hour reviewing the important spells, then we start on elementary dueling spells.” They broke into pairs, Harry and Kingsley both checking everyone’s basic spells. At least from Harry’s point of view, the afternoon passed quickly.

They stopped practicing at five o’clock, and dinner was scheduled for six. Some trainees went to their tent, while others sat at the main

table and chatted; a few kibitzed while Cho and Luna worked on the food not far away. Harry decided to join Hestia, who was talking to them. He looked down at a work table and saw five chickens, heads and innards removed, already plucked, looking not altogether different from the many whole chickens he'd seen in Muggle supermarkets. The main difference was that these chickens were larger.

"How long did it take to pluck them?" he asked.

Cho picked up a chicken, immersed it in the water, and scrubbed it. "Only a few seconds, there's a good spell that does it. I had my mother teach me some household spells before I left."

"She doesn't know—"

"No, she doesn't," she gently chided him, as if he doubted her ability to keep a secret. "I didn't tell her why I needed it, just that it had to do with the Aurors. Her exact words were, 'if the Auror Leader needs you to know how to pluck chickens, then who am I to argue.'"

Harry chuckled. "Good attitude. What are we having with the chickens?"

"Just side dishes from the miniaturized stuff, bread and vegetables. We decided that for a week we'd just focus on preparing the main dishes, and when we got used to that, we'd start with the side dishes."

Harry nodded. "Sounds reasonable. How are you doing with this, Luna?"

He saw Cho's eyes flick to Luna, as if Cho was curious how Luna would answer. "Well, I managed," she said serenely. "I think that's the most I can say. It was difficult, though."

Cho gave Harry a wry smile. "She apologized to the chickens before killing them." Harry wasn't sure whether Cho's tone communicated 'isn't that cute' or 'isn't that silly.'

“What you might want to do, Luna,” suggested Hestia, “is something I’ve read that some North American aboriginal cultures used to do. Rather than apologizing to the chickens, you thank them. The idea is that in some sense, they know their place in the circle of life, the food chain, whatever. A chicken’s place is to be eaten, and we—and the aboriginal Americans—need food to live. So, you thank the chicken for its sacrifice.”

Unseen by Hestia or Luna, Cho now gave Harry a look that he was sure was one of ‘that’s silly.’ But as she turned to look at Luna, the look transformed to ‘that’s interesting.’ Harry didn’t blame Cho; it did seem silly. But if it would help Luna, then he was all for it. He had a fundamental respect for Luna that he suspected Cho, along with many others on the island, didn’t have.

“Thank you,” said Luna to Hestia. “I’ll try that.”

“Just wondering,” said Harry, “but these chickens aren’t even started cooking. How will they be ready by 6:00?”

Now Cho gave him an amused look. “This is one of those ‘oh yes, you grew up with Muggles’ things.”

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance at himself. “I have a feeling that magic is somehow involved,” he said in a self-deprecating tone.

“Pretty much,” she agreed, picking up a bottle of some spice, Harry couldn’t tell which one. He had never been interested in food preparation, but felt as Leader that he should at least look in on every aspect of the operation.

Dinner went over well, as it seemed that everyone was satisfied with the chicken. Seamus said he felt it was good, but a little tougher than he was used to; Cho explained that not wanting to be wasteful, they had chosen chickens that were older than were normally eaten by those who raised them for food. “Once we’re sure that the replenishment rate is okay, we’ll start eating younger ones.”

“How do you know how old they are?” Harry asked.

Cho just gave him a look similar to the one before. "Ah. Magic," he said. "You know, maybe before I ask any question about the food, I'll stop and think about whether the answer could be 'magic,' and if it could be, I won't ask the question."

"Now, now, Harry," Kingsley mock-chided him, "there are no stupid questions."

"Only stupid people," George instantly chimed in.

"I don't know, I heard lots of stupid questions at Hogwarts," added Lee.

"Like, did you enjoy Umbridge's lesson?" suggested George.

"Do you think the Slytherins are cheating at Quidditch?" put in Lee.

Neville spoke up. "Do you think it's safe to eat this candy that Fred and George gave me?"

The table broke up in laughter. "Of course not!" shouted George.

"That is a stupid question," said Ron through his laughter.

The same sort of atmosphere continued all through dinner. I know it won't always be like this, thought Harry, but it's nice when it is.

Two days later, after breakfast, Kingsley asked to talk to Harry alone, and they went into his tent. Harry sat on the sofa, and Kingsley, on the chair kitty-corner from it. "So, Harry, how are you doing?"

Harry shrugged. "Okay, I guess. It seems to be going fairly well."

"We have a long way to go, but yes, no problems so far," agreed Kingsley. "I will say, though, that I'm a little concerned about George."

"Why?"

"It just... seems to me that he doesn't have the seriousness of purpose that we look for in an Auror. Now, I know what you're going

to say, this is George, so what did you expect? I've spent enough time around them, I suppose I should say, around him, to know what he's like. We've had mouthy Aurors before, and irreverent ones, and ones that were both. But usually, in the training period, they kept a lid on it, at least when they were around senior people. Not just because of his comments, but I wonder how serious he is about this. Just a feeling."

Harry thought about it. "I guess it may not help that I asked him to do it, in a way that I didn't with most of the others. With him, as well as with Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny, it was like, I hope you'll do this. With the others, it was like, how do you feel about doing this? Do you think he might think he's doing me some favor?"

"It's possible, especially since as you said, he hasn't given up on the shop, he's kept one foot in that. It's your decision, but you might consider sitting down with him and asking him to keep the comments to a minimum during lectures, at least. I'm not comfortable with the influence it could have on the others. Again, granted, they know him, and it doesn't mean they'll do the same thing. Still... it doesn't sit right with me."

Again, Harry paused before answering. "I understand. When you're conducting the lesson, if you want to do that, I'll back you up. If he complains to me, I'll tell him he should heed the wishes of whoever's running the session. But as for me, I'm not quite ready to do that. It's a little too soon. I guess that since I'm the one who asked him, I should give him a little more leeway."

Kingsley appeared not to be thrilled with Harry's answer, but didn't let the feeling show too strongly. "Okay. Now, there's another thing I wanted to talk to you about, see what you thought. We talked about the possibility of doing Auror character tests on the island, even though there aren't too many chances. What I'm thinking of would be a kind of collective test. You, me, and Hestia would basically hide for a week."

Harry nodded. "Lord of the Flies." To Kingsley's quizzical glance, he explained, "A book they made us read in Muggle school, about a group of kids who get stranded on an island, with no adults. They

eventually descend into a savage, survival-of-the-fittest tribe, one is killed by others, and so forth.”

“Well, we can reasonably hope that wouldn’t happen,” said Kingsley dryly. “But yes, that’s the general idea, to see what they would do.”

“The portraits already mentioned this,” said Harry. “They sometimes used the island for training, and when they had five or more at the same time, they would sometimes do that. They thought it might be a good idea for me to do. I thought about it, and decided I didn’t want to. I felt as though I would be betraying their trust a bit. I mean, these aren’t ordinary recruits, these are people I grew up with, who’ve known me since I was eleven. I feel like I don’t want to do this without a very good reason.”

“I’m sure you know this, but there is a good reason. It’s a test of their ability to handle unexpected situations, and that’s very important for an Auror. They’d figure out it was a test, and I think they’d figure out why. But just knowing it’s a test doesn’t mean it’s easy to pass. I don’t see why you see it as a betrayal of trust. It’s not as though they need you to get by.”

Harry sighed. “I can’t explain it easily, maybe not at all. I guess I just don’t see it as important enough to do something I’m not comfortable doing. So... I’m still probably not going to do it, but other than what you’ve already said, are there any important reasons to do it?”

“It could give you useful information about any particular person,” explained Kingsley. “Not only having to do with unexpected situations, but also in general the absence of an authority figure. People act differently, and you might not know it until an important situation occurs. A rough analogy is that children left at home alone might misbehave, and some might behave as usual. It’s good to know who might do what. And it might be good for them to know, too. They themselves might not realize it until it happens, and then they know that’s something they have to address. One of the things I’ll be lecturing on is self-improvement, the idea that you have to constantly look at yourself to see where you could improve. Like any test, this might give them very useful feedback in those terms.

"I understand why you don't want to do it, Harry, even if you can't fully articulate it. To the best of my knowledge, there's nobody outside this island who you would count as a friend. Balancing your roles as Leader and friend won't be easy, and is something you'll have to work out by yourself. Tilt too much to one side, be too chummy, and being a true leader will be difficult; your authority could be undermined. Too much to the other side, and they might stop considering you a friend. Especially on the island, I'll see my role as trying to let you know if you seem to be going too far toward one side or the other."

"I hadn't thought of it exactly like that," admitted Harry. "But I see what you mean. I suppose this is one of the things you can tell me that the portraits can't, since even though I've explained the situation in general, I don't think I can explain it so well that they can understand it. But thanks."

"No problem. Lastly, I'll be leaving soon, flying to Australia to set up the emergency Portkey. I might be back in time for dinner, but if I'm not, have them save some food for me, okay?"

"Sure." Harry paused, then asked, "Shouldn't, like, shouldn't Hestia go with you?"

"Why?"

Harry shrugged. "Not that it's going to, but something might happen. If it did, no one would be around to help you, in the middle of the ocean, like that."

Kingsley gave him a small grin. "Very good. That was a small test, which you passed. She absolutely should, and I was already planning for her to. On any mission like this which is far from routine, two Aurors should participate. And even routine missions are often conducted in teams."

Harry found himself mildly annoyed at being tested, but repressed it, as rationally he knew that he needed to be tested in some ways no less than the trainees, of which he was one in a sense. "Okay. After you get back, stop by here and let me know how it went."

“That would be what we normally refer to as a ‘debriefing,’ said Kingsley humorously. “I’ll be here.”

He left, and as was becoming usual after he talked to Kingsley, he spent some time pondering what had been discussed. Wondering if this would become usual as well, after a while he decided to get up and visit Ron and Hermione. He didn’t mention specifically the test Kingsley had suggested, wanting to leave room for him to change his mind, but talked about the possible conflicts between his roles as friend and Leader. They seemed to sympathize, and to understand his dilemma, which made him feel a little better. They had to stop when Harry realized that it was almost exactly time to start training, and he would be doing it himself today. That made the choice of topic—dueling—unavoidable, as it was the one area in which he now had at least semi-expert knowledge. It was the only thing he felt comfortable teaching without the experienced Aurors.

He stepped out of the tent and headed for the main table, followed by Ron and Hermione. All of the trainees were there, waiting to proceed to the field for the day’s training. Harry saw Luna and Cho talking at the food preparation area, and suddenly changed his plans. Deciding not to take them out to the field just yet, Harry said, “Cho, Luna, would you join us for a minute?”

Surprise on Cho’s face—it seemed that Luna never appeared surprised—they walked over to join the others. Facing the group, Harry began. “There’s something that’s not strictly part of the Auror training that I want us to do, or try to do, and I’ve asked Luna and Cho to join us for reasons that’ll soon become clear.

“I think most of you know that in my recent three-month stay in Japan, I attended what they called an advanced tactical school, one from which they choose the best students to become Aurors. And, you know from my speech when we defeated the dementors that they have group spells over there. They practice them from an early age, when they start their equivalent of Hogwarts.

“They couldn’t explain to me how to use them, and I tried with my three friends there for months, and I couldn’t do it. Then I finally realized that to do the spells, you had to... think like a Japanese, be

in this... mental space similar to what they were in. Even if I'd known that this was necessary when I first got there, I couldn't have done it, because I didn't know how to think like them. After three months, I knew, or at least enough, and I was finally able to join them in the spells. The group spells are very impressive; as the old proverb says, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

"So, what I'm hoping is that if we practice it regularly, we can do that. My notion is that we have the mental space—I don't like that phrase, but I can't think of a better one—the mental space we had as DA members. That's what everyone here has in common."

Seamus raised a hand slightly. "Well, not everyone."

"Okay, that's true. But we did have you for one lesson, and I hope you'll use the memory of that, the feeling of connection with other DA members in the time at Hogwarts when Ron, Hermione, and I, and others, weren't there. Anyway, I want you all to, when we do this, imagine yourselves back in the Room of Requirement. It's three years ago, we're trying to learn but Umbridge is stopping us, that feeling we had of wanting to do something useful. When we practice, we need to be summoning that feeling. And I've asked Luna and Cho because they were members too, and this will be a DA thing. Hestia won't be joining us for this."

Ernie broke the silence. "All the Japanese can do group spells?"

"Pretty much, yes," said Harry. "But I was told that it often took them two or three years to learn them. But I was able to do it in three months, so I have hope that we won't take that long, if we can. I want to practice this every day, maybe for ten or fifteen minutes. I'm hopeful that this can work. I think that if I could do it with the Japanese, we can do it too."

They walked away from the table, stood in the grass, and started firing test spells. Nothing unusual happened from the spells, and Harry certainly hadn't expected that it would. For a while, it would be more about getting them in the right frame of mind than expecting results.

Cho and Luna went off to do their work—today, they would be fishing for the first time (Harry reflected that with nets and magic, the fish didn't have much of a chance)—and Harry and the trainees walked into the middle of the large field for their practice. Harry spent the first hour going over the fundamentals of dueling: body positioning, watching the opponent's wand, blocking spells, and movement. After some practice and demonstration bouts, he started going into more details, and the time seemed to start to fly by. Everyone seemed interested, as dueling was relatively important in wizard lore, but the time they normally would have studied it—seventh year—had been taken up instead by Dark magic, at least in Harry's year.

By the end of the day's training, most everyone seemed to have picked up the basics. Harry noticed that a few people, including George, Ron, Corner, and Lee, were being a little lazy on defense, and firing shots that their sparring partners weren't blocking, but that they shouldn't have attempted because a competent opponent would easily block them. "You shouldn't underestimate your opponent," he warned. "I don't care if you're practicing against someone who you know has less skill, or less natural talent. You always treat them as if they're highly skilled, you never let your guard down for a second."

"Harry, we're just learning," protested Corner. "Why is it so super-important to be so careful?"

Harry paused, then decided he would open up a little to properly emphasize the point. "Because I had a friend who didn't, and he died because of it." He saw Ron and Hermione looking at him somberly. He wasn't sure how many of them knew about Sirius, but assumed most of them did. "I know you're only just learning, but this is important, and not just because of me. I really think Kingsley and Hestia will agree with this. But even if they didn't, this is still what I want. Now, let's do it again."

They continued practicing, but Harry was still dissatisfied with the performances of many of the trainees, who he felt emphasized offense too much at the expense of defense. Unhappy but not wanting to repeat himself so soon, Harry called an end to the practice, as the normal end was approaching. As they walked back, he had an idea. "Ron, you brought a chess set, right?"

Ron nodded. "A regular one, not a wizard one. Why?"

"Could you get it out? I'd like to have a game, and I'd like everyone to hang around. I think it might be useful to illustrate a few strategic ideas."

Shrugging, Ron said, "Sure," and headed toward his tent to get the set. He and Harry sat at one end of the table, and the others gathered around, either standing or sitting in such a way that they could see the board. Ron put a pawn in each hand, put them behind his back, and held out two fists to Harry. Harry tapped the left fist; Ron opened it to reveal a black pawn. They moved the board accordingly. "You mentioned strategic ideas," said Ron. "Is there any special way you want me to play?"

Harry shook his head. "Just play as you would normally play. Assume it's important to win."

"I always do," Ron assured him, as he moved the pawn in front of his king two spaces forward.

Harry decided that for the first ten or so moves, he would try to appear to play as he had always done in the past. Ron didn't know that he had become an expert player as part of the quests he'd gone through to get the anti-dementor spell, and he didn't want to tip Ron off. He made moves that were slightly offbeat, but not damaging to his position. Ron played as he always did, self-assuredly and aggressively. With his new chess experience, Harry understood that in the past, Ron had always counted on him to make mistakes.

Harry made two moves in a row that appeared to be mistakes, including one which lost him a pawn, in the service of developing his pieces quickly. Ron took the pawn. His pieces were in developed, aggressive positions, but had no specific strategy or threat, and he hadn't castled yet. Harry made a move putting his queen deep in Ron's territory, making no specific threat but hemming Ron in and disallowing castling. Ron's eyebrows went up, but he proceeded with the game seemingly unconcerned with Harry's queen, making threats against a few of Harry's pieces.

Harry then made a move that took a piece out of danger and made multiple threats in conjunction with the queen at the same time. This apparently had an impact on Ron, and he took more time with his next move. His move was defensive, but not the best one, and it was too late. Three moves later, Ron's position was in ruins, and after another three, he was checkmated.

"Whoa, Ron! What happened?" said George, in a slightly mocking tone.

Ron shook his head in disbelief. "Didn't see that," he admitted, looking at Harry quizzically, as if unsure why his skills had apparently deserted him.

"Okay," said Harry. "Now, what I wanted—"

"Wait a minute," said Ron. "Can we do that again?"

Harry was disinclined to, but Ron's tone was unusually insistent, so he decided to agree. They switched colors, and Harry began as before. Ron took more time with his moves, and again, Harry tried to give the impression of someone making random moves while actually playing intelligently. Ron again started attacking pieces, which Harry defended against while trying to develop his position. Again, Ron made the mistake of failing to castle. This time, Harry moved his pawns forward aggressively, and after sacrificing a bishop, moved a knight deep into Ron's side of the board. "Ron! In trouble again!" said George loudly. Harry glanced up at him, as did Ron, who was clearly getting angry. He thought more, and made a defensive move, which Harry met with an unexpected move taking a pawn and making a threat. "Ooooooh!" gushed George. Other people were starting to whisper.

Again, Ron's position was starting to fall apart under Harry's organized onslaught. George spoke again. "Wow, Ron's playing like he's under a Confundus curse—"

Harry had had enough. "Cut it out, Malfoy," he snapped, glancing up at George. He heard a collective intake of breath, knowing that

everyone was surprised at his words, even as he stared at the board. A quick glance told him that Ron was even angrier. Whether it was at him or at George, Harry wasn't sure.

"Hey, that's uncalled for," protested George. "Do you know how many times he beat me or Fred and gloated—"

"I said, cut it out," repeated Harry, his own anger now clear. George looked away in annoyance as Harry refocused on the game. Nobody said a word more as the game ended in three more moves, this time not in checkmate, but with a disgusted Ron knocking over his own king, the standard gesture indicating resignation of a chess game.

"Okay," said Harry, trying to keep any emotion out of his voice. "It seemed like most of you understand chess, at least enough to follow what was going on. The point I was trying to make here—"

"He underestimated you," cut in Corner. "I'm a decent player myself, I could see what was going on. You were pretending to be bad, lulling him into a false sense of security."

"Yes, that's right—"

"But Harry is bad," protested Neville. "No offense," he quickly added to Harry. "I'm not very good, and Harry and I were always about equal. Ron always killed me. Did you get good, or was that some magical trick?"

"You all know about that quest I went on, where I had some visions. One of the things I had to do to get by was to beat a good chess master, and I had to learn by playing hundreds of games, learning from experience. Time didn't move while I was doing it, and it seemed to take forever. So now, I'm almost equivalent to a master."

"Ron clearly didn't know that," commented Corner. "Did you not tell him on purpose?"

Ron's expression was clearly accusatory, his eyes on Harry. "No, I just didn't happen to mention it. The point was that this illustrated really well the point I was trying to make before, about never

underestimating anyone. Ron was playing carelessly, banking on me to make mistakes, because I always have before.” A few people glanced at Corner, who nodded in agreement. “He’s capable of playing much better than that, but you get into habits when you play a lot of inferior opponents. I wanted everyone to understand very clearly what can happen when you underestimate an opponent. I don’t care what you know, or think you know. Never anticipate mistakes, never do any less than your absolute best. One mistake can cost you a lot,” he added, with a glance at Ron, hoping Ron would understand his reason, why it was important to him. Ron stared straight ahead, not meeting Harry’s eyes, trying to keep his emotions under control.

“What would you have done if Ron hadn’t played carelessly?” asked Parvati.

“Then I would have made note of the fact that he played carefully, even though he had no reason to think he had to. Either way, my point would have been made.”

“But you expected him to play this way,” suggested Corner.

“I had no particular expectations,” Harry said, in a statement that was at best a half-truth. “The important point was that I had ability that he didn’t know I had, and that was what was necessary to make the point. Okay, we’re finished here, everyone should feel free to do what they want until dinner.”

More abruptly than he normally would, Ron stood and walked directly away, into the nearby trees and vegetation until he could no longer be seen. Harry exchanged a worried look with Hermione.

“Oh, one other thing,” added Harry when he was sure Ron was out of hearing range. “There’s to be no mocking.” He wasn’t looking at George, but he was sure everyone would know what he meant. “Humorous insults are fine as long as you’re sure that you have a relationship with the person in which that’s known to be okay. If you’re not sure, don’t do it.”

“There’s really going to be a no-mocking rule?” asked George in disbelief. “What are we, children? Is there a no-mocking rule among the real Aurors?”

“There shouldn’t be a need for one,” replied Harry, trying to control his emotions. “But there is here, now. Mocking doesn’t help anything, and I want people to learn.”

“Well, I’m sure he learned not to trust you,” retorted George hotly. “Mocking isn’t okay, but humiliating your friend by crushing him with abilities you hid from him is. It really sounds like you’re making up these policies on the fly.”

“It wasn’t my intention to humiliate him, but it was yours. That’s the difference.”

“Oh, please,” said George sarcastically. “You know him better than anyone, you had to know, you must know what he’s like when he’s competitive, like when he was having those problems with Quidditch—“

George cut himself off, and Harry suddenly knew that George realized for the first time what Harry had meant with the Malfoy comment; he knew that both of them were remembering ‘Weasley is our King.’ More quietly, and with emotion, George shook a finger at Harry. “This is different from that. I’m not Malfoy.”

“Different degree, same concept,” argued Harry.

“Totally different. I’m his brother, and I love him, even though if anyone tells him I said that I’ll deny it to the death. This is me, Harry, this is who I am. If you didn’t want me to be like this you shouldn’t have asked me to come.”

“You’re not usually like that. But what I said applies to everyone. If you upset someone by mocking them, it means you’ve gone too far.”

George scoffed, making no more noise than an exhalation, but offered no further comment. Harry sat for a moment, not moving, then

realized that people probably wanted to talk, but not around him. He stood and walked to his tent.

In the silence, he realized that with his enhanced hearing, he could hear what was being said, and decided to listen. "I have to say, I'm with Harry on this," said Neville. "I've been mocked plenty, I know what it's like. We don't need it."

George sounded frustrated. "Neville, I'm his brother. It's different."

"You were enjoying his discomfort. I don't have a brother, but if I did, I'd hope he wouldn't do that."

Harry heard Lee's voice. "Neville, were you really unhappy about the things like the Canary Creams?"

Neville hesitated. "I knew it was in fun, and I tried to react accordingly. But there's always some part of you that doesn't think it's funny. I think it just depends on the person. Now, I'd have no problem. I guess I'd say that context is really important."

"But why should Ron get so angry at losing?" asked Parvati. "It's just a game."

"Clearly," said Lee humorously, "you are not a man."

"I'd like to think that's clear, yes," she agreed.

"Men are competitive, and Ron certainly is," Lee explained. "You hate to lose, and Ron was losing when he expected to win, in front of people, his loss being an object lesson of what not to do. I wouldn't be thrilled either."

"But wouldn't an Auror be expected to keep emotional control in that kind of situation?" she persisted.

Now Dean spoke. "Probably, but that's easier said than done. I'd guess you have to work at it. I'm with Lee, I might've reacted like Ron did."

“Do you think Harry shouldn’t have done it?” asked Parvati.

There was silence for a few seconds, then Hermione spoke; unable to see, Harry wondered if some people had looked at her, seeking her opinion. She sighed heavily. “Especially the second game, it really pained Harry to do what he did. The last thing he wanted was to hurt Ron, I could tell that. George, I think that’s why he was so angry with you. To him, you were pouring salt on a wound that he was hoping to minimize. But the thing you have to remember is this: Sirius Black was Harry’s godfather, and his father’s close friend. Harry only knew him for two years, but they were very close, and Harry really suffered when Sirius died. You also have to remember that if any Auror here dies in the line of duty, it’s going to be extremely hard for Harry. No matter what the circumstances are, he’ll feel responsible. So I’m pretty sure that while he didn’t want to embarrass Ron, he feels that if his making the point so dramatically like that helps anyone not to make that mistake in the future, and it saves their life, it’ll have been worth it. He wasn’t making this point for the heck of it. For him, this was deadly serious.”

Harry heard no more words for a few minutes, after which people started to talk about other topics. He stopped listening, and let his thoughts drift. As usual, he thought, Hermione had gotten it right. He hoped that Ron’s anger would be temporary, and that he—maybe with Hermione’s help—would understand Harry’s reasons enough to forgive him.

Harry came out for dinner ten minutes before it was scheduled to be served, and chatted with people until it was ready. Unlike the other meals, Ron sat on Hermione’s left as Hermione sat to the left of Harry. He chatted with people near him but was a bit more reserved than usual, and didn’t try to talk to Harry. At the table in general, there was less conversation than usual.

Soon after dinner ended, he went back to his tent for the night. Three hours later he was reading a book when he heard a knock at the door. Hoping it was Ron or Hermione, he shouted, “Come in,” and opened the door with his wand. He found he was surprised to see Kingsley coming inside, even though he should have known Kingsley would be back before bedtime.

"How'd it go?" asked Harry.

"Nothing exceptional, meaning there's nothing to report. The Portkey has been activated, and it's set up in the way we discussed."

"Good. So, you said it's in a lightly forested area, but not too far from a wizarding village that has a hospital."

Kingsley nodded. "That's right. Even if the person was wounded and alone, they could shoot up a distress flare, and it would be seen in the village. Healers would respond quickly."

"And the Confining spell is ready."

"Yes, it should activate automatically. Do you want to test it now?"

"No, tomorrow should be fine," Harry said distractedly.

"Okay," said Kingsley as he stood. "See you tomorrow."

He headed for the door; just as he reached for the handle, Harry said, "Kingsley?"

"Hmmm?"

"How long have you been back?"

"Uh, about an hour. Why?"

"Have you... heard what happened?" Kingsley nodded wordlessly. "Who told you?"

Now Kingsley seemed disappointed. "Come on, Harry, you know I can't be telling you stuff like that."

"I'm not trying to get anyone in trouble," Harry protested. "I'm just curious."

“There are... some things about which you will have to be less curious. You shouldn’t ask questions like that unless there’s a truly compelling need to know.”

He had to admit that Kingsley was right. “And you had no comment on it, as Devil’s Advocate?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“It was an excellent idea. An important lesson, delivered with impact. It’s one thing to just say, ‘Always play your best game,’ but it’s another to demonstrate it so aptly. You always want to use appropriate examples or analogies when you’re teaching. And looking on the bright side, nobody’s going to think that you’ll show Ron and Hermione any favoritism.”

Harry looked at Kingsley sourly. “That’s not much comfort.”

“Hey, it’s not nothing. That is a real concern—not that you would do it, I mean, but that they would think it.” Kingsley looked at Harry, clearly understanding his state of mind. “Harry, don’t worry. I do think Ron will get over it. This kind of thing is an adjustment for both you and him. Give him his space, and there’s no way he won’t understand that what you did wasn’t personal.”

It took Harry a few seconds to sort through the negatives in the sentence. “I hope so. Anyway, thanks.” Kingsley nodded and left.

Harry tried to read for a while, but was easily distracted. He wanted to visit Ron and Hermione’s tent, but knew that he shouldn’t. He thought of apologizing, but was that something he should do? He finally, reluctantly, decided to let it go for the night, and hope things were better in the morning.

I asked them to join the Aurors, to help me out, thought Harry. But would I have been better off not having them join, but keeping them away from my work life, so I wouldn’t risk problems like this? What if

this kind of thing happens more and more, and I lose them as friends?

They had been together for so long, and been through so much together, that he found it hard to imagine. But at times like this, it was all too easy to imagine.

He woke up the next morning and glanced over at the window. It was mostly dark, but there was enough light that he knew the sunrise wouldn't be far away. Might as well get up, he thought.

Leaving his tent, he found nobody outside, or at least, nobody hanging around the communal table. He decided to take a walk, and headed towards the thicket of trees that surrounded the large grassy area.

He marveled as he looked around. Trees with lemons, apples, oranges, even some grapevines. He was hardly an expert in which crops grew where, but he was sure that all of the things that grew there—he had even seen some corn the day before—could not grow naturally in the same place. He remembered Malfoy and the coffee, and imagined there had to be a special horticultural discipline that involved making sure crops grew where they normally wouldn't. He remembered Sprout mentioning something about the subject, but he hadn't paid attention well enough in Herbology. Neville would probably be interested, he thought. He absently picked a few purple grapes off a vine and ate them. Delicious, he thought. I could eat a lot of these.

He walked for a while as the sky slowly got brighter. The sky was mostly clear, with a few scattered clouds, which were mostly orange at this point in the sunrise. Also very nice, he thought. I wonder if anyone's ever tried to live here for an extended time. You certainly could. Then again, maybe that's how whoever made the island this way did it; by living here and tweaking it, treating it like artwork, changing this and that until it was perfect. A few more of this or that tree or plant, more or less food for the animals to control the population. He did remember the portrait of the fifth Leader say that he had called upon the finest horticulturists of his time. Maybe the

discipline had been more important at that time, and didn't matter much now to most people.

He heard the vaguest hint of a voice, and thought he had to be mistaken. Who would be out here at this time? He concentrated, and his now-acute hearing took over.

"I wish I didn't have to do it," Luna was saying. "But I know it should be me." Surprised, Harry walked toward the sound, which was still some distance away.

"You see, Cho doesn't understand," Luna continued. "I don't blame her; most people don't. But I know you have feelings, and they're important. Maybe I don't have to apologize, but I feel like I should explain. You see, Harry's trying to help our society, and we're here to help him. He can do a lot of good, so we should all help him. You're helping him too, in your own way. I'm sure he appreciates it."

He heard no other voices; who was she talking to? As he got closer, he heard the sounds of chickens clucking, and couldn't help but break into a smile: she was talking to the chickens. Very Luna.

He emerged from a group of trees into a clear area, and was very surprised to see Luna sitting cross-legged on the ground, with a chicken on one knee, and another next to her. She reached out and stroked its feathers; to Harry's amazement, it didn't react. Harry was reasonably sure that chickens couldn't be domesticated. Was it magic, or just Luna?

She heard him, and looked up. "Oh, hello, Harry. How are you doing?"

He gave the 'so-so' hand gesture. "Okay. I just thought I'd take a walk, I didn't think anyone would be out here. You seem to have a way with the chickens."

She nodded. "They like me, which is nice of them, considering that I'm rounding them up to turn them into food. I was just explaining to them that I'm doing my best to make it as painless as possible." She gently lifted the chicken off her knee, put it on the ground, and stood.

“I don’t think they understand the words exactly, but I think they understand feelings. They know I sympathize with them, and don’t want to hurt them. Would you like to say something to them?”

His eyebrows went up slightly. He reflexively wanted to decline on the grounds that it would be silly, but he decided to try to see the world as Luna saw it. He realized it didn’t matter what he said so much as how he said it. He looked around, trying to see the chickens as ‘God’s creatures,’ as he’d heard a man on TV once talk about animals, rather than as future dinners. “Thank you all for helping us out,” he said, feeling silly but good at the same time. He paused, then shrugged at her, unable to think of anything else he could say. The only other thing that had come into his head—‘I’m sure you’ll all be delicious’—seemed rather inappropriate.

She stood next to him and patted him on the shoulder. “That was good. I’m sure they know you mean it.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Did you just decide to take a walk, like me, or did you come specifically to talk to them?”

“I wanted to talk to them. I just hoped I could reduce their anxiety. I mean, these particular chickens have never seen humans before, and we come in and start taking them away. I thought the least we could do was explain why we’re doing it.” They started walking away slowly, towards the campsite. Holding up a basket, she explained, “I also thought that while I was at it, I’d try to find some fresh fruit to have with breakfast.”

“Good idea. Well, I’ll help you.”

“Thank you. So, have you talked to Ronald yet?”

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. I thought about it a lot last night. I understand why he was upset, but I don’t know what I would have done differently.”

“I think it’ll be all right,” she said, with a casual tone. “I’m sure he knows you didn’t do it out of malice. You’re close friends. That’s what’s important.”

He found himself smiling, her simple, direct, and unaffected manner raising his spirits. "Thank you, Luna," he said, putting his arm around his shoulder and giving a squeeze before letting go.

"Oh, you're welcome," she said. "It's just the truth." There was a pause, and just as Harry was about to open his mouth, she spoke again. "But, you know, I don't think you and I could ever be boyfriend and girlfriend."

Stunned, Harry did a double-take. "What?" he said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I mean, because you put your arm around me," she explained.

Still surprised, he said, "Well, I mean... I've done that with Hermione before, not too long ago."

"Oh, I know, but that's different, because your relationship with her is more clear. She already has a boyfriend."

Harry wanted to ask what had made her come out and say that, but that was just Luna being Luna. After a few more steps, he decided to ask about the thing he was wondering about. Normally he wouldn't ask the question, but he thought, if she can say it, I can ask about it. "Honestly, when I did that, I wasn't thinking about it like that. But why is it that you think that we couldn't be boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"I just don't think we have the right character for each other," she answered.

He got the impression—he didn't know whether it was the Auror Leader truth-telling sense, or just intuition—that she was doing what he'd seen many people in Japan do: avoid an uncomfortable response with an evasion. But why would she say that, then avoid the reason? He was now curious enough not to just let it go. "And what is it exactly that makes you think we don't have the right character for each other?" His tone was not hostile, but curious.

When she answered, her tone and expression were just a little different than usual, but he couldn't put a finger on exactly how. "I think my character is... unusually peaceful," she began. "You know, like, most people would kill the chickens without worrying about it, but it bothers me. Now, I don't mean you're different from most people; I know I'm the one that's different. But, for example, you did the Cruciatus Curse against that teacher, the Dark wizard..."

Feeling as though he'd been accused, he jumped in before she could continue. "Well, that situation was very unusual." Wanting to say more, he found there was nothing he could reasonably say that would justify his actions, and then he remembered what Kingsley had said about justification. He now felt compelled to add, "Obviously, I shouldn't have done it."

As they passed a banana tree, she pointed her wand up; a large bunch of ripe yellow bananas broke off and floated down into her basket. "Oh, I know you know that," she said calmly. "I don't mean to say that this is something you always do. But I just don't think I have it in me to do that, and I don't think I could be with someone who does. I think I need to be with someone who's more like me in that way."

You might not feel that way if you'd had the experiences I've had, Harry thought but didn't say. Also, he wasn't sure that it was true. She had, after all, been held captive at Malfoy Manor, which had to have been harrowing. Still, didn't everyone have that in them, at least to some degree? Wasn't that part of being human? He almost said it, but again held back. There was no point in accusing her. Clearly, if she was wrong, she wasn't aware of it. Unable to think of anything to say that wasn't defensive or accusatory, he walked on in silence. He looked around for fruit, but couldn't find any.

After a minute or so, she spoke again. "I'm sorry, Harry. I think I've upset you."

He held back a response of 'no kidding.' He still respected her, and her honesty—over-the-top though it could be—and he would be as open and honest with her as he could manage. He remembered the letters they'd exchanged that had helped him quite a bit. With a wan

smile, he said, "If I didn't respect you so much, it wouldn't bother me. And... it's partly that, and partly just the fact that I did it. Looking back, I wish I hadn't. So, it just reminds me... well, let's put it this way: I'm glad that only you and Professor McGonagall know about it, and that it'll stay that way."

"It will, of course," she said. To his surprise, she transferred her basket to her wand hand and took his hand, holding it. Making eye contact, she said, "I am sorry."

He squeezed her hand. "I know," he said, and they let go. "You're just... being you, and there's nothing wrong with that. I've had the thought before that if there were more people like you, the world would be a better place."

She smiled delightedly. "Thank you, Harry! That's very sweet." Her mood brightened, she asked, "So, speaking of that subject, do you have designs on anyone, as a girlfriend?"

He shook his head. "No, and I wasn't planning to, on this trip. The last thing I need to do is get involved romantically with someone whose boss I am, who I have authority over. That could get very messy. And there's also the fact that as Auror Leader, my romantic life could get very complicated..."

"Because you won't know who's interested in you for that reason, or just because it's you," she surmised. "I'm sorry, that must not be easy for you."

"I haven't given it too much thought, to be honest. Being Auror Leader is hard enough, and I suppose I felt like I wouldn't worry about that for now, that it would take care of itself in the future."

"I can understand that. But, you know, I think Cho is interested in you." He looked at her quizzically. "I don't know that for sure," she explained. "She didn't say, 'you know, I really fancy Harry.' But it's her tone when she's said something involving you. It's... a little cheery, excited. Just a little."

Harry was dubious, but he also trusted Luna's instincts. After all, she'd had insights about him, things that he himself hadn't realized. "But she has a boyfriend."

Luna nodded. "She's mentioned him, too. The feeling I got in the times she talked about him was like, he's okay, he's nice enough, like that. Not a lot of enthusiasm. She doesn't miss him, I'm sure of that. I was a little surprised; I've never had a boyfriend, but I would think that if I did, and I had to be separated from him for a year, I'd miss him. I don't know how many people here have partners—besides Ron and Hermione, and Neville and Ginny, of course—but if they had them, they had to be apart for a year."

"Katie Bell," said Harry. "She wants to be an Auror, and I want her, but she has a boyfriend, someone she's in love with. It was a tough decision for her, because she wanted to be here, but she didn't want to be apart from him. She said she'll train with the first group, that are trained in real time."

"I can understand that," she agreed. "So, when you were with Cho, what did you like about her?"

He smiled, a little embarrassed. "I have to admit that it was 99% that she was pretty. At that age, you just like someone, you don't think about why. I realized later that I didn't have hardly anything in common with her." He didn't want to bother explaining that this had happened during the Auror Leader test; though it was an alternate reality, it accurately reflected most people's character.

"Oh, look! Peaches!" exclaimed Luna, pointing. "I didn't see them before." They went over to pick a few, and drifted off into other topics of conversation.

Ten minutes later, they were almost back at the camp when, to Harry's surprise, Ron was walking through the trees toward them. Luna glanced up at Harry with a quick grin. "I'll go on ahead, get these back for breakfast," she said, with a cheery 'good morning, Ronald' for Ron as she passed him.

"Hey," said Ron casually, with slight discomfort.

Harry nodded. "How did you know where I was?"

Ron shrugged. "Hermione has this locator spell."

"Ah. Well, she has a spell for just about everything."

"Yeah, I reckon." He paused, then added, "We had a fight last night. I don't mean, a bad one, just she was upset at me."

"Why?"

"Well, by bedtime, I was pretty much over what happened. I made the mistake of saying that to Hermione, and she got all over me to go over and tell you. I just wanted to sleep on it, make sure of how I felt. She kept after me, and the more she bothered me about it, the more determined I got to do it the way I wanted to do it. You know, I have to live my own life. I can't just do it the way she wants me to."

"I gather she was not receptive to this view," Harry said wryly.

Ron grinned at Harry's phrasing. "No, she wasn't. She accused me of being stubborn for the sake of it, not admitting I was wrong. You know, the usual stuff."

"Well, tell her that next time she should leave you alone. I'd much rather you talked to me because you wanted to than because she wanted you to."

"Yeah. Well... don't tell her I said this, but she might've been right."

Harry smiled. "Wouldn't be the first time. Look... I wanted to apologize, but the problem is, if I had it to do over, I wouldn't do it differently. But what I can say is, I'm sorry that there wasn't a better way for me to get across the point I thought was very important to get across."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Very neatly phrased."

"Thank you."

Taking a deep breath, Ron said, "I get it, of course. Especially when she reminded me that this was mostly about Sirius, it was hard to stay mad at you. And I can forgive you more easily than I can George. Your Malfoy comment was right on the mark; that song was going through my head just when you said that to him. Uncalled for, my ass. It was very called for."

Harry nodded. "You going to talk to him?"

Ron shook his head. "If he apologizes, and I think he means it, we're okay. If not, I'm just going to keep my distance from him, treat him politely. Not like he's my brother. I mean, if only a few people were there, and it was during off time, what he did would be one thing. But with eighteen people, as an official activity, it's really another. Hermione thinks he feels entitled, because of what he said about when we were kids. Well, we're not kids anymore.

"But I also want to say that she said, and I realize she was right, that I shouldn't have reacted that way anyway. I should have just taken it in stride, it's just a chess game. I shouldn't have let George's cracks bother me either. If I'm going to be an Auror, I can't go losing my temper every time someone mocks me. So, I'll try to do better with that."

"Thanks," said Harry. "One of the portraits once said that everything that happens to us is a learning experience, or at least it can be, if we take the effort to learn from it. Maybe I should mention that to the group. Who knows, George might take heed."

"Doubt it," said Ron. "But anyway..." Ron gestured to the clearing, an invitation to end the conversation and go wait for breakfast. Happy that the problem was at an end, Harry walked back to the camp, Ron at his side.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 4, The Test: As George's uncooperative behavior escalates, Harry, Kingsley, and Hestia unexpectedly disappear, leaving Ron and Hermione in a difficult position.

From Chapter 4: Heads swiveled to stare at George. "What the hell is wrong with you?" demanded Corner. "I mean, smart remarks are one thing, but this is mutiny!"

Chapter 4

The Test

Breakfast went off without incident. George kept to his usual friends, Lee and Angelina, and didn't come in contact with Ron or Harry. Ron continued to sit next to Hermione, explaining that he simply found he preferred sitting next to her. Harry had no objection, but found that Cho now took the previously empty seat to Harry's right. He saw no obvious evidence of what Luna had talked about; Cho was friendly, but in no way that seemed inappropriate. Harry assumed that part of the reason was that Cho, unlike most people there, didn't have anyone from her usual crowd of friends at Hogwarts. He wondered if that would make living among them more difficult for her. He resolved to be friendly to her, but definitely not do anything to give an impression he didn't want her having.

As they were finishing, he remembered something he needed to mention. "As you know, yesterday Kingsley and Hestia flew to Australia to set up the Portkey. It's near the beach; I'll show you all where it is later.

"I suppose you don't need to be told, but I will anyway, that using this Portkey is an extremely grave matter," he continued. It flashed through his mind that he'd never used the word 'grave' before; he had picked it up from the portraits, who tended to use it quite often. "Off the island, even though Australia is far from England, the chances of endangering the timeline greatly increase. It's only to be used to save lives. I can't emphasize that strongly enough."

"What's the procedure that'll be followed if someone's seriously injured?" asked Hermione.

"Kingsley brought an artifact, one that keeps a person in suspended animation for about ten days. The first priority would be to get them into that, then turn it off long enough for Cho to get whatever information she needed to say what should be done next. If she thinks it's dire, and there's nothing she can do, then we use the Portkey. But even though I want everyone to know where it is, I don't

expect anyone to have to use it.” There was some quiet nodding, but no comments or questions.

Kingsley would conduct most of today’s sessions; he had told Harry he wanted to emphasize early on some spells that he thought were important for Aurors but not taught at Hogwarts. “Today, the first thing we’re going to work on is the Propulsion spell.” As he spoke, Fawkes suddenly swooped out from behind some trees, and flew over them. Harry was a little surprised; Fawkes had spent time with him in his tent, but so far hadn’t joined them on the field.

“Cool!” exclaimed Justin.

“Why is he here?” Ernie asked Harry, who shrugged.

“Maybe he’s here to challenge Harry to a game of chess,” cracked George. Harry didn’t know exactly how much disrespect George intended, but couldn’t help but chuckle at the thought. He saw several heads swivel to look at George, whom they clearly thought had spoken out of turn. Harry turned to look at Ron, who rolled his eyes, communicating ‘just ignore him’ to Harry without words.

“He’s beautiful,” remarked Angelina.

Harry glanced at Kingsley, who seemed a little annoyed. Harry stepped forward and turned to face the others. “Let’s give Kingsley our attention, okay?”

There were no further comments; Kingsley gave Harry a wry ‘thank you’ expression. “Propulsion is, as it sounds like, a spell that propels something away from you.” He reached into his robes and produced an apple, then held it up in his palm. Pointing his wand at it, he caused it to fly about twenty feet away, where it hit the ground. “Basically, it’s the opposite of Summoning.”

“Why don’t they teach this at Hogwarts?” asked Padma.

“Good question,” agreed Kingsley. “I think they should. The answer, I think, is that while it’s relatively ‘cool,’ it doesn’t have too many

applications in daily life. It has considerably more value for Aurors, however.”

“What’s the range?” asked Lee. Kingsley responded by Summoning the apple, setting it up again, and pointing his wand at it. This time, it shot straight ahead a meter and a half off the ground, much faster than the last time, going between Harry and Ron. As it approached the nearest trees, Kingsley pointed his wand up, and the apple suddenly shot upward, clearing the trees. They could see it pass the trees and the beach, and finally splash in the water, perhaps a half a mile away. A few people started applauding; humorously, Harry joined them.

“Very nice,” marveled Angelina.

“You wasted an apple!” joked Lee. Kingsley pointed his wand again, and after a few seconds, the apple came sailing back into view; it flew to Lee, where it hung in the air, a few drops of water falling off of it. “Help yourself,” offered Kingsley. With a grin, Lee said, “Thanks for washing it for me,” and took a bite.

“You’re quite welcome,” responded Kingsley. “Now, this can serve as a distraction when fighting an enemy; you can shoot things at him. Of course, he can shoot them back at you, so be careful what you use. There are pellets we sometimes use, things that explode in midair, and you use this spell to send them on their way. We’ll be going into that later; for now, let’s just get the spell down.”

“Can this be used on people?” wondered Corner.

“Stay away from Michael, everybody,” joked Justin.

“It can, though of course it would be considered an assault, like most spells you do on anyone unwilling,” answered Kingsley. “In fact, this spell is the basis for the spell that allowed Voldemort to fly.”

A few people exchanged surprised glances; clearly, not everyone knew about that. “How was it the basis for that?” asked Harry. “How did that work?”

"The tricky part," explained Kingsley, "was the way in which he directed the spell, so that it kind of curved around and hit himself in the back. It was as though he was constantly propelling himself forward, often at very high speed."

"Faster than a Firebolt, anyway," muttered Harry.

"Exactly. Now, most people, including Aurors, don't try to do that. Not so much because it's difficult, which it is, but because it's not so necessary. And it requires a great deal of magical power. So, I don't recommend that anyone think about it in compensation for not being able to Apparate."

"Why would we not be able to Apparate?" asked Dean.

Damn it, thought Harry. "Sorry, that's my fault," he said to Kingsley. Stepping forward again to speak to the group, he said, "This is something I forgot to add, that I was going to tell you before we left. I don't want anyone Apparating on the island. Consider this an Apparition-free zone."

"Why?" asked Ernie.

"First of all, the island is pretty small, no more than three miles in any direction," said Harry. "But the main reason is that I don't want people to get in the habit of Apparating around all the time. Aurors need to be in good physical condition, so the least we can do is get around on our own feet."

"Because Merlin knows, we wouldn't want things to be too convenient," said George sarcastically. Surprised, Harry decided to ignore this, but had the sudden thought that perhaps Kingsley's concerns about George had been justified. This was a problem, he realized, that he would have to deal with at some point.

"Are there any exceptions to this no-Apparating thing?" asked Dean.

"Luna, Cho, and Kingsley are exempt," said Harry. "They aren't Aurors, and I'm not going to take it upon myself to tell them what kind of physical condition they should be in. Kingsley has said he doesn't

plan to, though. The only exception I can think of would be a health or injury-related one. Of course, if someone's in very bad condition or injured, they shouldn't try to Apparate; it's better if—if someone's with them—that person does the Apparating, back to camp to get Cho and whoever else, so they can then Apparate to that spot."

No one else made any comment, and they got back to working on the Propulsion spell. Harry wasn't familiar with it, but found that he picked it up very quickly, faster than anyone else in the group, and was using it to greater effect. He couldn't help but wonder if this was another result of the Auror Leader test; did it somehow confer an ability to learn spells quickly? He felt mildly annoyed as he realized that he would never be completely sure of such things in the future. Maybe when he got back, he would ask the portraits for a complete list.

* * * * *

The next few weeks went by fairly smoothly, as Harry and the Auror trainees slowly got used to their routines. The food preparation improved, to the point where they stopped using the miniaturized food entirely, and Luna and Cho had learned to bake bread, courtesy of one of the books Hermione had suggested taking along.

The main problem, the only problem, continued to be George's attitude. George had avoided Harry and Ron since the chess game incident, and he continued to make wisecracks during training. Individually, each was defensible as a joke, but taken together, they reflected an attitude that suggested to Harry that he'd made a serious misjudgment in asking George to come with them. He'd simply assumed that George would act as an adult, and no other trainee had let him down on this front; all took their duties seriously, looking to the future as defenders of society.

The last straw, for Harry, came when just after an afternoon practice a group of trainees were talking about the notion of patrolling the shops in Diagon Alley. Corner said that he was sure that there were many shop owners who would be willing to pay Aurors bribes to spend more time near their shops than they otherwise would. Harry felt that Corner's tone was responsible, noting it as a fact, not anything to be pleased with. George's response was a flippant

“Clearly, there’s good money to be made as an unethical Auror.” Bad as the content was, what was worse to Harry was the casual tone, as though there was nothing particularly wrong with being an unethical Auror. Considering that it was unethical Aurors that had caused Kingsley to feel it necessary to make Harry take the Auror Leader test, Harry was especially sensitive to the notion.

He waited for several minutes so it wouldn’t appear that he was responding to that particular comment, then approached the group and asked George to come with him. He’d prepared himself for the notion that George would challenge him to talk about it in front of others, or refuse to come, but George simply stood and followed Harry to his tent.

Harry motioned George to sit, and they both did. “George, it seems to me that you don’t really want to be here. Do you think that’s true?”

“Why do you say that?” asked George, trying for a reasonable tone.

With a light sigh, Harry answered, “I think you know. It’s your attitude, the comments you make—“

Interrupting Harry, George immediately turned sarcastic. “I’m sorry, Harry, I hid from you my irreverent nature. You had a right to know that I’m the sort that likes to break the tension with humor.”

Again, Harry sighed without noticing it. “The humor is different than it was. It used to be silly, funny, and sometimes cutting, but usually at teachers. You didn’t want to be at Hogwarts, and you got out when it didn’t suit you anymore. Now, your humor is kind of sharper, even though you came here of your own free will. So... why did you come here?”

George’s response was immediate. “You asked me to. And by the way, I don’t accept your premise about my humor. I don’t think you’re qualified as a humor critic. Now, I grant you that authority figures tend to be on the receiving end of my humor, as was the case at Hogwarts. I submit that now that you’re an authority figure, your view of it is affected by where you sit.”

George's answer had angered Harry even before Harry realized why, but the reason quickly came to him. "Yes, you did make comments like that about Snape, Binns, Lockhart, and even ones we liked, like McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout... but never Dumbledore. Your jokes were in sympathy with him, never pointed at him, and he was the biggest authority figure at the school."

"His actions, his manner, everything about him merited respect," argued George. "Sorry, Harry, but you're not Dumbledore."

"And I haven't done anything that merits respect," countered Harry. George stared, saying nothing. "Look, George, I would never say I was anything like Dumbledore. I would love to be, someday. I know I'm incredibly young to be in this kind of position of authority, and you know better than most that I didn't ask for it or want it. But I'm stuck with it, and I asked you here because I wanted your help. You're one of the five people—Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and you—that I didn't quiz about their reasons for joining, that I simply asked for help and hoped that their loyalty to the values we all believe in would make them want to help me in this extremely difficult job I now have. Right now, all I'm asking of you is that you not do things that make my life more difficult. Is that something you think you can do?"

Harry could see he had affected George by reminding him of what he, Harry, had done in the past. He wasn't fond of bringing up such things, but it did seem appropriate right then. George paused before answering. "I think you're overreacting to the things I say, and I really do think you might have thought about it more carefully before asking me, knowing how I am. This is me, Harry, this isn't something I can turn on and off like that. You might as well ask Hermione to stop showing off how much she knows, or ask Ron to stop being so competitive. Now, having said that, I'll admit that I might have thought about it more carefully as well. I may have overestimated my ability to fit into an authority-driven structure; there's a reason that Fred and I went into business for ourselves. Something about being your own boss. So, why don't we do this: I'll take the Portkey, and stay in Australia for the year. Give me—"

Harry's jaw dropped. "George, you can't be serious! You know I can't do that."

“Give me a tent,” George continued, raising his voice a little over the interruption, “and a year’s worth of the miniaturized food; I’ll pay Kingsley back when the year is up. I’ll do the anti-detection spells that you three did, stay out of everyone’s way.”

The last sentence set off alarm bells in Harry’s head, prompted by his ability to detect lies. The last sentence wasn’t a lie, but Harry detected strong equivocation; George was clearly far from sure that that was exactly what he was going to do. Horror filled Harry as it dawned on him what George was contemplating. Eyes wide, he gasped, “You’re thinking of trying to save Fred.”

George rolled his eyes. “Well, now I am, now that you’ve said it. But just because you say it doesn’t mean I’m going to do it.”

More equivocation, thought Harry. “Are you saying that if you went to Australia, you absolutely, positively wouldn’t seriously consider going back to try to save him?”

“Well, the more you talk about it—“

Harry was fast losing his patience with George’s evasions. “Answer me!” he demanded.

“I don’t see why I should—“

“Because I’m the one whose decision it’d be to let you go or not!”

“So now, I’m a prisoner—“

Harry decided to try to draw it out more directly. “I have a Time-Turner, I have the ability to go back and save my parents, who died saving me. Do you see me doing that? Do you think I’m going to?”

“They may be your parents, but you didn’t know them! I knew Fred, we spent every day together. It’s a loss that you can’t understand!”

“That makes it worth risking catastrophe—“

“You’ve taken risks for your friends before!”

They fell silent as it dawned on both of them that George had as much as admitted that he had a desire to do it, and had given it serious thought. Harry put his head in his hands, unable to believe what he’d heard.

“I can’t let you go, George,” he said heavily. “I don’t want you to feel like you’re a prisoner here, but I just can’t do it. Let’s... let’s give it a couple of days, both think about it, and then we’ll decide what to do from here on out.”

George stared at him. “But you’re saying that whatever I promise, going to Australia isn’t an option.”

Harry stared back. “No. It isn’t.” Wordlessly, George quickly stood and left.

Full of tension and adrenaline, Harry walked over to the bed and lay down. How can he even be thinking about this, wondered Harry. He knows what’s involved. This was now a crisis... he would have to get Kingsley’s advice, and Ron and Hermione’s, maybe talk to Lee and Angelina to see if they could have some influence over him... He wondered if this would be his life from now on, reeling from one crisis to the next. Shaking his head, he got up to go outside. He would start talking to people after dinner.

He was only a few steps away from his tent when Ron and Hermione walked towards him, intercepting him. Ron gestured him to walk a few steps away, presumably so they couldn’t be overheard. “Were you just talking to George?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You don’t look like you had a good conversation,” observed Hermione. Harry rolled his eyes.

“I just passed him a few minutes ago,” said Ron. “I made some general comment, and he just said, ‘bugger off,’ pretty angry. I was like, what did I do?”

"It wasn't you, it was me," Harry told him. "But it's not something I want to talk about out here. An hour or two after dinner, okay?"

They nodded, and the three walked back to the main eating area. People were learning to conjure, and a half-dozen people sat or lounged on various odd-looking creations. Harry veered over to the 'kitchen' area, as he had come to think of the place where Luna and Cho got the food together. He tried to come by once every day or two, so they wouldn't think he'd forgotten about them, or didn't appreciate their efforts.

"How are you two doing?" asked Harry.

"Good, just fine," said Cho cheerily. "I never thought about having this kind of career, but there are interesting aspects to it."

Harry wondered if she was complaining. "You know, Cho, I did represent this to you as more of a health thing. If you'd rather spend less time doing this—"

"No, it's fine, it's fine," she assured him. To Harry's surprise, his lie detection ability kicked in, telling him that she would in fact rather spend less time doing what she was doing. He suspected that she was lying because she didn't want to be seen, in front of Luna, as requesting not to have to prepare food. She had brought plenty of medical books, as he'd promised her she'd have a lot of time to study them, which would be advantageous for her Healer training. He would talk to her privately later, then he would talk to Luna, to see how much of the burden of food preparation she felt able to take on.

He looked down at the counter and saw a dozen large potatoes, including one that was enormous, almost half the size of a human head, and oddly shaped, a little like a human in the fetal position. "Good Lord, is that a potato?"

"Oh, yes," said Luna calmly. "This seems to have grown naturally, but you can get them to grow like this, or even bigger. My father grew fruit and vegetables like that occasionally."

Cho turned to look at Harry. "What does that mean, 'Good Lord'?"

"It's a Muggle expression," said Harry. "We use it when we're really surprised by something."

"Ah," said Luna. "So then, can we say, 'Good Lord, you wanted to make Draco Malfoy an Auror?'"

There was a burst of loud laughter nearby; Harry turned to see that it had come from Justin, standing not far away, talking to Ernie and Terry. "Doesn't sound quite right, does it?" grinned Justin.

"No, it doesn't," agreed Harry. "Surprised, but I guess, not in every case. Depends on the situation."

"Would that be like, 'Merlin,' or 'oh, Merlin?'" wondered Justin.

"Maybe," agreed Harry. "But I could never get used to saying the 'Merlin' things. It just sounded stupid to me."

"You know," remarked Terry, "I read a book that suggested that Merlin was a big old fraud."

"Really?" said Harry.

Hermione now joined the conversation; Harry noticed that it seemed to be getting crowded around the food preparation area. "Do you mean, 'Merlin, Man or Myth?'"

Terry shook his head. "It was, 'The Great Deceiver.'"

"Oh, yes, that's mentioned in a footnote in the one I read," nodded Hermione. "But they don't have it in the Hogwarts library!"

Harry leaned over to Justin and commented, "I love how Hermione reads footnotes."

Justin grinned. "We always thought she should have been a Ravenclaw."

Terry and Hermione appeared to take no notice. “There’s an old copy in the Ravenclaw common room library.”

Hermione seemed frustrated. “It always seemed so unfair that Ravenclaw got that library. Why not just keep all the books in the main library, so everyone can read them if they want?”

“Because nobody else cared,” said Justin quietly; Harry suppressed a chuckle.

“Because,” countered Terry with a feigned air of superiority, “they were rare books donated to that library through the years by former Ravenclaws for the express purpose of being in that library.”

Hermione scoffed. “Just so you can feel superior to everyone else.”

“Okay, you have to move this conversation to the table,” announced Cho loudly. “Food’s almost ready, we need space.”

As they started moving, Ron said, “Yeah, it always used to tick me off that Ravenclaw had all those rare books!”

Hermione gave him a disdainful look. “Why?” asked Justin, as if Ron were serious.

“Because then we had to listen to Hermione complain about how Ravenclaw had all these great books,” responded Ron, with a grin at Hermione.

“Don’t joke with Hermione about books, Ron,” advised Terry humorously. “For her, and for Ravenclaws, it’s serious. But Hermione, it’s not to feel superior—I know you were joking, at least I hope—but it’s to remind us that books are precious, that the knowledge of a lifetime might be in each one, and the loss of one—I mean, if all copies are lost—can be a great loss for everyone. There was a powerful spell on all the books—”

“That didn’t allow them to leave the common room, I know,” said Hermione sadly.

"We couldn't even take them to our dormitories," said Terry. "If we did, they would disappear to their place on the shelf, and we couldn't pick them up for another day. It was pretty strict."

Everyone started sitting at the table as the conversation continued. "I have to admit," said Harry, "that now that I'm Auror Leader, and there are lots of things I need to know, I'm starting to appreciate the value of books more. And I also heard that thing about Merlin. I told you in that quest, I had to learn enough to beat a really good duelist. He said he was a contemporary of Merlin's, and that Merlin was a huge self-promoter."

"What was his name?" asked Hermione, very interested.

"He wouldn't tell me," said Harry. "All I know is that he was tall, maybe six-three, with a goatee, unfriendly, and arrogant. Oh, yes, and he could read minds."

"Wilfred Landon!" exclaimed Terry and Hermione in unison. Harry had to laugh, as did Justin, Ron, and a few others.

"That's so cool, that you met him," said Terry excitedly. "What did he tell you?"

Harry told them as much as he could remember, then added, "He didn't go into it that much, though. He wasn't much for chatting. It was pretty tough; I had to beat him even though he could read my mind."

Terry whistled, impressed. "How do you beat someone who knows what you're going to do?"

Harry's attention was momentarily diverted by a spell passing in front of him, one that he was sure only he could see. Glancing over, he saw that it had come from Kingsley, sitting three seats away. He guessed it was a Propulsion spell, to drive away an insect. People had been using the spell a lot for that purpose.

Returning his attention to Terry, he said, "Partly by making your shot so good that he can't beat it even though he knows it's coming. But

also by not planning your shot in advance, just doing it spontaneously. I learned that doing that minimized his advantage.”

Plates of food started arriving, as they always did, by being levitated over by Cho or Luna. Harry Summoned some mashed potatoes to his plate, then a couple of pieces of chicken. “Do you think Merlin really was a fraud?” asked Corner.

Harry shrugged. “I have no way of knowing. I am pretty sure that this guy thought so. He was really annoyed at me for wondering whether what he said was true; he seemed really indignant. So, if he’s right, then yes.”

“Guess it helps to write your own legend,” observed Ernie.

“So, who’ll be writing your legend, Harry?” asked George from across the table. It took an effort of will for Harry not to react with annoyance. Yes, he thought, I can look forward to George tweaking me for the next who knows how long.

He managed to remain outwardly unaffected. “With my luck, probably Rita Skeeter.”

“Stay on her good side, it might be a terrific legend,” said Terry. “I’ve heard that if she likes you, she makes you look really good. You could be the next Merlin.”

Ron chuckled. “Just what Harry wants,” he said sympathetically.

Glancing down at his food, Harry saw a sudden change: what appeared to be a small ball of magic, no bigger than a sunflower seed kernel, flew over and embedded itself in his mashed potatoes. Glancing over, he saw Kingsley’s hand move away from his wand, which was now resting on the table. Clearly, it had come from Kingsley. What was it?

Pretending nothing had happened while he worked it out, he Summoned some broccoli to his plate. “I think Harry’s already being seen as the next Merlin,” commented Seamus.

“Who knows, maybe people will think I was a big old fraud,” said Harry, hoping the topic would move on from his legend. He still had to struggle to keep his annoyance with George under wraps.

“If Skeeter writes about you, they will,” said Hermione. With smug satisfaction, she added, “But she won’t, if she knows what’s good for her.”

Harry suddenly realized, as he took a bite of chicken, what Kingsley had done. He put something in my food; the only purpose could be to have a physical effect, to knock me out. Why? He wants to do that test, the one where we leave everyone alone. I didn’t want to do this one, and this is his way of doing it. I don’t have to take responsibility, since he knocked me out, and he doesn’t know I know, since he doesn’t know I can see spells. He took a bite from the potatoes, but avoiding the part with the magical ball. He wanted to think about it for a minute or two.

“What do you mean, ‘if she knows what’s good for her?’” asked Parvati.

Hermione hesitated. “This is something that has to stay within the Aurors, but it’s good if everyone knows...” As Hermione told the story, Harry continued working on his food, making his decision. He had to admit there was a reasonable point to the test, and this way, if the trainees were angry at being tested like that, they would be angry at Kingsley, not him. He decided, and as Hermione finished her story, Harry took the last bite of his potatoes.

As if on cue, Hestia, who was sitting next to Cho, stood. “Cho, would you come over here? There’s something I need to ask you about.” Still in the middle of her meal, a surprised Cho nodded, and walked away with Hestia. Harry immediately understood: if he fell ill, Cho would naturally be right there to check him, which Kingsley didn’t want. Hestia’s job was to distract Cho.

Wondering when the symptoms would start to hit, he suddenly realized they already had. Reaching over for a glass of water, his hand faltered, falling to the table just short of its goal. He lurched to

his left, fell into the lap of a surprised Hermione, and the lights went out.

“Harry! What’s wrong?” gasped Hermione.

Kingsley was up in a flash. “It’s okay, I’ve got him,” he said, reaching in under Harry’s arms with both hands to pull him out of his seat. Holding Harry with his left arm, wand in his right hand, he Disapparated. Both Kingsley and Harry were gone.

Shocked, Ron and Hermione leaped to their feet. “Kingsley!” Ron shouted.

Cho came running over. “What happened?”

Everyone was now standing and looking around. “Harry fainted,” said Neville. “Kingsley grabbed him, and Disapparated them both away.”

“What?” exclaimed Cho, shocked. She whirled around. “Hestia? Did anyone see Hestia?”

“Hermione,” said Ron, “Do that locator spell. First, Harry.”

She took out her wand, moving it in a 360-degree pattern. “Harry’s not on the island,” she reported. Ron’s eyes went wide. “Kingsley isn’t, either. Nor is Hestia. They’re all gone.”

“Where could they have gone?” asked Ginny.

“Australia,” said Hermione and Ron, almost as one. “Cho,” asked Hermione, “did Harry have any medical condition that you were aware of?”

“No,” she answered. Somewhat indignantly, she added, “And why did Kingsley just Apparate him away as soon as he fainted? That’s supposed to be the whole reason I’m here!”

“It’s a test,” said Neville firmly. “It has to be. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Maybe,” suggested Padma, “it was some weird thing that Kingsley recognized, some medical emergency, and he knew there was no time to lose. Apparate to the Portkey, take it, get him to the hospital in Australia.”

Hermione looked doubtful. “Not impossible, but it stretches credulity. I think Neville’s right.”

“We can do the spell to see if the Portkey’s been used,” suggested Terry.

“Good idea,” agreed Hermione. “Cho, what was Hestia talking to you about?”

“Something about the food, nothing urgent,” said Cho. “I was wondering why she pulled me away from the table, then this happened.”

Terry nodded. “Diversion. It’s a test, definitely. Hestia’s helping Kingsley.”

“Terry,” said Hermione, “why don’t you Apparate to the Portkey and check—“

Ron quickly spoke. “Harry said, no Apparition.”

Hermione appeared about to argue, then changed her mind. “Harry’s not here,” pointed out George.

“So we start breaking every rule he made just because he’s not here?” retorted Ron. “If this is a test, which it almost definitely is, that’s not what you want to start doing. But more importantly, Harry’s the leader here, we came here knowing that. We do what he would want us to do.”

“And who up and made you the leader now?” George challenged him.

“Harry’s the leader, and that doesn’t change just because he’s not here. Or in the future, when he goes abroad, do we start doing whatever we want just because he’s gone?”

“Cho, you can Apparate,” pointed out Hermione. “Would you pop down there and do a status check on the Portkey?”

Cho nodded. “Sure.” She disappeared, and returned several seconds later. “Hasn’t been used in the last 24 hours.”

“That confirms that it’s a test,” said Ernie.

“So, what do we do now?” asked Justin.

“First, let’s analyze this,” suggested Hermione. “It was almost too easy for us to figure out that this was a test. Kingsley could have, for example, waited until the middle of the night, gone to Harry’s tent, Stunned him, and taken him away. We don’t notice until morning, and they’re just gone, we have no idea what happened. Why not do that?”

There was silence for a few seconds. “We’d think it was foul play,” offered Ron. “An unknown person on the island, a predator, whatever. We’d have to assume that, go on full alert, do searches—”

“Entertain the thought that one of us is a criminal using Polyjuice Potion,” cut in Terry.

“Exactly,” agreed Ron. “It’s a full-blown crisis. Kingsley must not have wanted that.”

“Why not?” wondered Neville. “It would still work as a test.”

“It would be an enormous test,” pointed out Ron. “After all, we’re not Aurors yet, and none of us is over 20. He may not have thought we could handle a crisis like that. This is a... gentler test, you could say. We know it’s a test, all we have to do is not panic, do what we’d normally do.”

“Do we know for sure that it was just Kingsley?” asked Padma. “Couldn’t it have been Harry, or both of them?”

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance, and shook their heads in unison. “It certainly looks as though he wasn’t in on it,” said Hermione,

“and if he was, I don’t think he’d have done it like this. This just isn’t him.”

“It does seem like more of a Kingsley thing,” added Ron. “Harry wants a real group feeling, so I don’t think he’d do this. Also, I do know that while Harry probably didn’t authorize this test, he’s given Kingsley permission to do tests as he chooses.” Hermione shot him a quick look that suggested that Ron had said something he shouldn’t have. “Kingsley might have figured that included knocking Harry out if that suited his purpose.”

“So, what’s the test?” asked Lee. “Like Ron said, just not panic?”

“I agree with that,” said Neville. “I mean, who knows, other weird things might start to happen, as part of the test. But if not, I think passing the test means doing exactly what we would otherwise do. To the extent that we fall apart without Harry, we fail. That’s how I see it, anyway.”

“Me, too,” said Padma, and a few other people agreed further.

“Next question,” said Terry. “Do we need a temporary leader?”

Ron and Hermione again exchanged glances. At the same instant, Ron said “no” while Hermione said “yes.” “We don’t need one,” protested Ron. “How many command decisions has Harry had to make in the last week? Pretty few. I think we can get through whatever time this takes without that. If everyone acts responsibly, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

“Things happen, Ron,” countered Hermione. “Neville could be right, there could be more aspects to the test. Decisions might have to be made, without time for debate. We need to know who’ll be making them.”

“They won’t be life-or-death things,” argued Ron. “If they were, Kingsley would’ve done it differently, like you pointed out. Any further tests are more likely to be moral, or the kind that acting responsibly and morally will deal with. I don’t want to elevate one of us above the rest. Harry’s the leader.”

"I'm not talking about 'elevating' anyone," she protested. "Just empowering someone to make decisions that may need to be made. We should have an election, we should all choose who it's going to be."

"Before doing that," said Ron, "let's have an election to decide whether there needs to be a leader or not."

"I know," said George sardonically. "Let's have an election to see whether we should have an election to decide whether there should be an election."

There was a slight pause as no one seemed to know what to say; suddenly, Luna spoke. "That seems unnecessarily complicated," she said earnestly.

Over half of the trainees, including Ron, chuckled. "Yes, I think so. Okay, first, we decide whether there should be a leader or not. Show of hands okay?"

"Wait, one question," said Corner. "Are Luna and Cho voting?"

"I don't see why not," said Neville. "They may not be trainees, but they did come here, and agree to be under Harry's authority. They should have a voice in whose authority they are under."

No one objected, but Luna said, "I think I'd rather not vote. I'll follow whatever is decided, though."

Eyes went to Cho, who shrugged. "I'd just as soon vote."

"All right," said Hermione. "Those who think we should choose a temporary leader, raise your hand." She raised hers, and counted. "Ten," she announced. "Out of sixteen, a clear majority."

"Okay," said Ron. "The next one has to be a secret ballot." Hermione looked unhappy at first, but nodded; no one argued. Seamus conjured pencils and pieces of paper, and distributed them. "Luna," suggested Ron, "since you're not voting, you be the one to count the

votes.” Again, no one objected, and Luna nodded her agreement. She collected the papers, then paused. “George, I don’t have yours.”

“Not voting,” said George simply.

“Are you still going to follow the leadership of whoever does win?” pressed Ron.

George stared evenly. “If I agree with it.”

Heads swiveled to stare at George. “What the hell is wrong with you?” demanded Corner. “I mean, smart remarks are one thing, but this is mutiny!”

“I don’t have to answer that. And it’s not mutiny. I came here on the understanding that Harry, not someone unchosen by him, would be in charge. Just because someone gets chosen by everyone else doesn’t mean they’re in charge of me.”

“Are you trying to be difficult?” Corner persisted. “I mean, are you making a sincere, devoted effort to—”

“Michael,” Ron interrupted him, “let’s not do this now. Let’s just vote, and worry about that later.” Corner looked unconvinced, but said nothing more.

“Suggested rules,” said Hermione. “Majority is needed to be chosen, top three candidates proceed to next stage of selection.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. “You make it sound complicated,” he joked. “But okay, whatever.”

Luna assorted the papers into piles and announced, “Hermione 7, Neville 3, Ron 3, Ernie 2.” Ron gave Hermione a glance that said, ‘looks like it’ll be you.’ She gave a light shrug, but appeared slightly pleased.

Seamus handed out new slips, and they repeated the process. Luna read out the new results: “Hermione 7, Ron 5, Neville 3.” Ron raised his eyebrows slightly, assuming that it was Ernie and Justin’s votes

that had gone to him. Seamus handed out more paper, and they wrote one last time. Luna counted them up, and announced, "Ron 8, Hermione 7."

It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was the more surprised one. After he recovered from his surprise, he said wryly, "See, this is one of the reasons I wasn't thrilled to have a vote. I didn't want people wondering who voted for who. Anyway, let's hope a lot of decisions won't be necessary. Like I said, we go on as we have been, and everything should be fine. Same eating times, same bedtimes, same practice schedule."

"Are you going to stay in Harry's tent?" asked Ginny.

"No," Ron answered. "And tomorrow was the tent-changing day, so I'll find some other way to randomize the tent assignments. Now, can anyone else think of anything we need to address, in this situation?" Silence greeted him. "Okay, then. We have a few hours until sunset, so, you know, do what you would normally do."

Ten minutes later, Ron and Hermione were walking through the trees and bushes, for no other reason than to have privacy to talk. Keeping his voice low, Ron said, "I feel as though I should apologize for winning."

She shrugged lightly. "In that case, I should probably tell you that I voted for you, all three times."

His eyebrows went up. "Well, then it works out okay, because I voted for you all three times, too."

Now she was very surprised. "Why?"

"You're the smart one," he said. "You always know what to do, in whatever the situation is."

She gave him a wry look. "Yes, I remember how I cleverly thought of using fangs from the basilisk to kill the Horcruxes."

"I'm not saying I never had a good idea. But you know what I mean."

“Well, you can ask me for advice, and I’ll give it. But I voted for you because I think people will follow you, more willingly than they’d follow me.”

Ron grunted. “Except for my brother.”

“He wouldn’t follow anyone,” she pointed out. “That really is going to be a problem. What are you going to do?”

“Give him a wide latitude,” Ron answered. “He might not follow anyone, but he’ll automatically rebel against anything I try to tell him to do. Whatever I do with him, I’ll need support from the others. I’ll basically wait until people are telling me to do something about him.”

“I suppose I can see where that makes sense,” she reluctantly admitted. “If it was me, I’d probably try to lecture him, and just antagonize him more. I was glad to see Michael stand up to him.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Ron. “Not that I want to see people oppose him, but it’s good to know that what he’s doing isn’t popular.”

The two wandered around for a while, then found a small hilly area in which, at the base of one hill, the grass-covered hill rose at a sharp angle from the ground, providing a perfect place to sit and rest against. They sat, and found they had a magnificent view of the sunset in progress, the clouds visible just over the trees. He reached over and took her hand; she gripped it tightly and snuggled against him.

“This is such a nice place,” she said contentedly. “I wonder if whoever worked on this island made it to be this way, helped create the hill like this.”

“Interesting question,” he said. “Considering all the nice touches on this island, it wouldn’t surprise me. I wonder if, after this year is over and we’re in our normal life, we could take vacations here.”

She smiled. “It’s a nice thought, but it might be difficult. Remember, Harry had to throw the Foreign Ministry people out of their own

section to do this secretly. He's not going to want to do that just for the sake of vacations."

"I guess," Ron acknowledged.

They sat for over a half hour, admiring the scenery and chatting about nothing in particular, when they heard the rustling of leaves being stepped on. They stood as three people—Padma, Parvati, and Terry—came into view.

"Hi," said Ron.

"Hi. Sorry to interrupt you," replied Padma. "This looks like a nice area."

"How'd you find us?" asked Ron.

Terry grinned. "Hermione's not the only one who can do a locator spell. We wanted to talk to you, and both of you is fine. It's about George."

Ron sighed. "Why am I not shocked."

"He's really getting out of control," continued Terry. "It's like Michael said, he's almost going out of his way to annoy people, to cause problems. After you left, he started making comments about the both of you, like, you must have gone off to have a fight because the vote was so close, like that."

"I called him on it," added Parvati, "and we got into an argument. The gist of what I said was that what he was doing was tearing people apart when we should be trying to work together, and he said that he isn't doing anything different than he ever did, and if Harry asked him, Harry must have wanted him to be as he was being. The fact is, of course, that he isn't being like he was at Hogwarts, but he won't admit that."

Ron shook his head sadly. "Yeah, I know."

"The interesting thing," said Padma, "is that he started a sentence, then cut himself off, but it seemed that what he was about to say suggested that Harry has already had a talk with him about this. Is that anything you know about?"

Both Ron and Hermione shook their heads. "He said something about that before dinner," said Hermione, "but we didn't have a chance to talk to him about it. We assume it was a talk with George, and his mood suggested it didn't go well."

"Ron, you're his brother," said Parvati in frustration. "You don't have any idea what could be up with him? He hadn't been like this in the past few months? Has he still not gotten over Fred's death?"

"He hasn't been like this," said Ron. "Not until we got to the island. He was fine before, or else I'm sure Harry wouldn't have asked him. And of course he was really sad at Fred's death—you all saw him at the funeral—but when Fred came back as a ghost, that cheered him up. He seemed all right after that. But believe me, I'm just as baffled as you are."

"What are you going to do?" asked Terry.

"As little as possible," he said. "If he wouldn't heed Harry, he's certainly not going to heed me. This is just part of the risk we took by going back in time; none of us can leave, so we're stuck with it. Short of locking him up, there's just nothing we can do."

"I'm afraid," said Parvati, "that he could disrupt the relationship, the unity, that Harry's trying to build. That group spell that he wants us to learn, this thing is just going to make that harder. Not to mention, what if he gets other people thinking like him?"

"Then it's better that we find out now," said Ron. "You could see this as part of the Auror test. If someone listens to him too much and adopts his attitude, then maybe they weren't right to be an Auror."

"You don't suppose this was the reason Kingsley did this, do you?" asked Hermione. "That he knew George would be like this, and to

see whether anyone would be influenced by him, especially without Harry around?"

Ron winced slightly. "I hope not. I suppose anything's possible, but that would be really kind of... cold." He paused. "Look, the best thing I can say, and I'd say this to everyone, is just try not to react to it. Don't respond, and if you can't stop yourself, then get away from him."

There was silence for a minute, as if no one knew quite what to say. Terry looked up at the sky. "Nice sunset."

Ron nodded. "Yeah."

* * * * *

The next two days passed in an atmosphere of repressed tension, as if everyone was waiting for George to do something beyond the pale. But George attended the practices every day, and while he continued to make less-than-friendly comments, none were quite so bad that Ron wanted to confront him.

Ron asked Padma and Terry to handle the randomized tent pairings, worried that if George were coupled with anyone he preferred not to be with, he would accuse Ron of having engineered it. As it happened, he was paired up with Ginny, to which he voiced no objection. Ron was glad, as he knew that his sister wouldn't put up with anything she didn't want to. But for the second time in four weeks, Ron was paired with Hermione, prompting George to 'joke' in a way that was not at all funny that Ron had arranged it, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Meanwhile, Luna was having her own problems. With Harry's absence, and after Harry's suggestion that she might want to spend less time preparing the food, Cho virtually abdicated all responsibility in that area to Luna. Luna tried not to be bothered—and now that she had a few weeks' experience under her belt, she did feel she could handle it by herself, even though it was a lot of work—but it was more the way Cho had done it, with an air of 'oh-you'll-do-this-won't-you' rather than as one equal to another. In the privacy of their tent, Cho

wasn't rude to Luna, but seemed to clearly regard her as one might regard someone of a lower status or rank.

In most of her time at Hogwarts, Luna had been treated like that or worse, and it hadn't bothered her; she had always felt as though she had a kind of mental shield that protected her from the poor treatment that had come her way. Not caring how she was thought of was essential.

That had started to change in her fourth year, when she became friends with Harry and the others, who were kinder to her than most others had been. Her association with them increased her status and profile, and by the end of her sixth year, after Harry defeated Voldemort and mentioned her in a speech watched by more than a thousand people, she was one of the most popular people at Hogwarts. It felt strange, and while her attitudes were sufficiently ingrained that it didn't affect her much, she felt that she could understand why people became addicted to popularity, sought it out so aggressively, and changed who they were to get it.

She knew she was thought of as 'spacey,' and she knew why, but had never told anyone (not that anyone had ever cared to ask). She had always kept it as a secret, one held in remembrance of her mother.

Soon after her tenth birthday, she had asked her parents how they met. They told her the story, and her father got out old issues of the Quibbler. He proudly showed her the very first issue, the one with the story that Witch Weekly wouldn't print but had inspired him to create his own publication. "How to Track a Snorkack" was the headline of a Page 1 article, with the sub-headline "The Door to the Twin Dimension."

Fascinated, she read the article, and a few days later she asked her mother to show her how to visit the twin dimension. Her mother agreed, but asked her not to say anything to her father just yet, "because you know how he worries." Luna agreed, and over the next few weeks, she slowly learned the spell that enabled her to move her consciousness to the dimension that, of all the dimensions in the multiverse, was closest to our own.

At first, Luna only used the spell occasionally, and the results were unremarkable: the twin dimension looked a lot like the normal one, and the main difference was that the twin dimension appeared slightly misty, as if one were looking at it through a thin fog. The places she saw were different and random, more likely to be near one's current location, but possibly as far as a few dozen miles away. It was on these occasions, her mother said, that Snorkacks were more likely to be seen.

It was only a month later that the devastating accident happened. She cried at times, but more often isolated herself. Her father was so buried in his own grief that he often didn't know what she was doing, and she spent long days in her bedroom, visiting the twin dimension as much as possible. The spell was difficult to do frequently; she could visit once every half hour at most, and then only for less than a minute each time. She found through experience that she was never 'gone' from this dimension even though she was elsewhere. When she used it consistently, it had a mild effect on her 'normal' consciousness: it made her appear distracted, as if her attention was only partly focused in the present moment, and the world around her was of only moderate interest. In the wake of her mother's death, she did the spell regularly for months on end, spurred on by a lucky sighting of a nest of Snorkacks on only her fifth try after her mother's death. They were beautiful, peaceful creatures, and gone far too soon. Her father finally recovered enough to notice the change in his daughter's demeanor, but attributed it to an emotional retreat, a reaction to her mother's death.

She saw things other than Snorkacks, of course, but they were mainly what she was looking for. She couldn't physically interact with the twin dimension, but it felt as though she was in it when she was there. Once in her first year at Hogwarts, while outside for a Care of Magical Creatures class, she saw two Snorkacks in the distance. Excitedly, she interrupted the lecture to point them out, but by the time anyone had looked, they were gone. Most everyone made fun of her, but it didn't bother her. She knew from her father's article that Snorkacks were one of those rare creatures that had the natural ability to cross over from one dimension to the other, for varying durations.

She had stopped visiting the twin dimension every chance she could, but she still did it frequently, and it provided emotional comfort. It was a chance to get away from reality, to go to a place that felt comfortable and welcoming. At first, it helped her deal with the reality of her mother's death; at Hogwarts, it helped her to be indifferent to how she was regarded. It never occurred to her that she might not be seen as so different if she didn't visit the twin dimension so often. She just did it, and didn't think about whether it was a good idea or not. She didn't tell her father, because her mother hadn't wanted him to worry. With him still broken up over her death, she didn't want to give him another thing to worry about.

The pattern continued until her fourth year, when to her mild surprise she started to make friends, including the famous (but surprisingly nice) Harry Potter. With people to talk to, the DA to practice with, and the school tense due to the presence of Umbridge, she started to visit the twin dimension less and less often, though still regularly. In sixth year, the ability to visit the twin dimension was largely what got her through the trial of being kept captive at Malfoy Manor with her emotional equilibrium intact.

After Voldemort's defeat, she told herself that it was time to stop visiting the twin dimension, or at least, to cut back to rare occasions. Now popular and respected, she had no need to withdraw from daily life, and she had come to realize that she came across better to others when she didn't do it than when she did. That lasted until her father's death; in her guilt and grief, she went frequently. She told herself that she might see some hint of him, some supernatural indication or message, but deep down, she knew that it was simply because it made her feel better.

She had planned, again, not to visit the twin dimension while on the island; she would be busy, and the companionship of these people was very important to her. This was a unique time, and she wanted to be fully present for it. Things had gone reasonably well at first, though she found herself wishing she and Cho were included in the tent randomization scheme. They'd had a good conversation at the party at the Hog's Head the day before leaving for the island, but they simply weren't compatible. Cho wore makeup, which Luna had no

use for; Cho worried about her hair and clothes, while Luna settled for making herself basically presentable. Cho clearly felt that looks were important—and who could blame her, having been praised for her looks endlessly, as she must have all her life—but Luna was sure that her future husband would love her for her character, not her looks. Luna gradually realized that Cho looked down on her for this—subtly, Luna felt, and maybe Cho herself didn't realize it—and at first, it didn't bother her much. Luna would try to make the best of the situation. But when Harry left, or was taken, the tension in the group rose significantly, partly due to the fact of the test itself, but mainly due to George's peculiar behavior. With the responsibility of food preparation suddenly in her hands, she found herself with more stress and less chance to relax. The occasional brief break from reality started to look more appealing. At least, until Harry gets back...

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 5, Harry's Decision: Upon returning to the island, Harry finds himself making a decision whose possible consequences include a disastrous time paradox, wiping out his timeline.

From Chapter 5: "Self-righteous bastard!" George spat loudly, and delivered a backhand blow with his right hand that hit Harry on the right side of his face, near the eye. George left the tent, took a step outside, and Disapparated as Harry followed him out, the door still open.

Chapter 5

Harry's Decision

After lunch, Ron and Hermione went back to their tent to talk before resuming training. Sitting next to each other on the sofa, they held hands as they talked. "Did you notice George during lunch?" she asked.

"Not really; I'm trying not to. Why?"

"I stole some glances," she said, "trying not to be too obvious. He was sitting with Lee and Angelina, as usual, but the dynamic was different. Usually they're fairly animated when talking to him, but today they were quiet, talking to each other more. Not that they totally ignored him, but their hearts definitely weren't in it. I was surprised."

Ron shook his head sadly. "I want to say 'that's good,' but I don't like how that sounds. This is so bad. I mean, we haven't gotten along perfectly, but he's my brother, and I don't want anything bad to happen to him. On the other hand, it's taken all of my will not to yell at him, with what he was doing this morning." During the morning's practice George had taken a few verbal potshots at Ron, who hadn't responded.

"I was impressed that you didn't," she said sympathetically. "I don't know if I could have held myself back."

"Well, you did," he pointed out, "and you don't want anyone doing that to me either. But yes, it was difficult. I just told myself that whatever he said I wasn't going to react, and I managed it. Look on the bright side, he can't try to get under my skin by insulting my mother."

"That might be funny, under other circumstances."

"I'm half serious, but I see what you mean. So, you're ready to try to teach the Slowing spell?" From one of the books she'd brought, she'd found a spell that seemed useful for Aurors, and that none of them knew. Over the past few days, she'd learned it from the books, and now felt she knew it well enough to teach it.

“Yes, but keep in mind that since it’ll now be me talking, he’s likely to aim his mouth in my direction. If he does, you have to do the same thing you’ve been doing: just ignore him. I know it’ll be hard, but you should.”

He looked her in the eyes, then sighed. “I’ll try.”

Twenty minutes later they were back on the field, Ron facing the other trainees. “This afternoon, we’re going to try a new spell. Hermione’s been working on this for a few days, and she has it now. So, she’s going to teach us.”

She stepped forward and turned to face the group. Before she could speak, George did. “Hermione, a teacher. Bet nobody ever expected that!”

She paused for a second, then spoke. “This is called the Slowing spell, and done correctly, it’ll cast a field that has an effect like slow motion on the other person. It doesn’t do it very strongly—I haven’t been able to achieve more than a 10% slowdown so far, and the books say that over the whole body, 40% is as much as even a strong wizard could hope for.

“Now, that’s when it’s applied to the whole body. The tactical value of the spell lies in directing it at the adversary’s feet. Focus it in a narrow area, and it’ll have a more concentrated effect. Of course, wizards aren’t in motion all the time when dueling, so this would only be useful in certain situations.”

She paused to take a breath, but George jumped in. “Like at Hogwarts, your classmates might’ve used it on you so you couldn’t raise your hand so fast.”

She closed her eyes for a second, summoning all of her will to stay calm and show no reaction. She continued, “If you think your adversary might run—“

“Will you just cut it the hell out!” exploded Parvati, turning to face George. “We’re tired of this! If you don’t want to be here, then just go! But don’t make us suffer!”

“I haven’t said anything to you, or about you—“

“It’s doesn’t matter!” she shouted. “It’s the whole thing, it’s everything you’re doing! You’re screwing this up for the rest of us. Harry made sure I was serious about this, he wanted to know that I would give it my all. I said yes, and I meant it. But you clearly aren’t—“

“Parvati,” Ron interrupted her. “Let’s just leave it alone—“

“No! I’m sick of leaving this alone! Something needs to be done!”

“Yeah?” George challenged her. “Like what?”

She ignored him. “Look, Ron, I have nothing against you, but I voted for Hermione. You know why? You and she were both prefects, but you never did anything. She got after people, made sure they didn’t do what they weren’t supposed to. I was afraid this might happen, so I wanted her in charge. You’d be fine if there were no problems, and I know Harry has confidence—“

“What would you have me do?” he asked.

“Tell him to cut it out!”

Ron couldn’t help but grin a little, though he was far from happy. “And do you think if I said, ‘George, cut it out,’ he would? Parvati, I’m less happy about this than anyone. But he’s not an idiot, he knows exactly what he’s doing. He’s trying to provoke us, me especially—“

“Oh, you flatter yourself,” George put in.

“For what reason only Merlin knows,” Ron continued, ignoring George. “But this is the problem with the situation, since we’re cut off. This is one of the things that was probably the reason for Kingsley’s test. If everyone acts as they should, with good faith, then we’re fine. But if even one of us willfully messes things up, we’re screwed. He knows

that, but he does it anyway. If I say, or Hermione says, cut it out, he says 'no,' then what? He said at the beginning that he wouldn't respect my authority, so there's nothing to be done. So, the best thing to do is ignore him. Or, the only thing, really."

Neville turned to face George. "George, we all like you, and we all respect you—"

"Funny way of showing it—"

"So I'm asking you, pleading with you if necessary, please, stop this. If there's something you need then tell us, but Parvati's right, it's making this a lot more difficult than it already is."

"And if not that, just go," added Corner. "But one way or the other, this can't continue. We're supposed to be Aurors, and Aurors are supposed to be serious, have lots of responsibility. You have a responsibility to this group, which you're not upholding."

"Just because there are some who don't like what I say—"

"Some?" retorted Parvati in disbelief. "Everyone who thinks that George should either shut up or stop practicing with us, raise your hand."

A dozen hands shot up almost instantly. Ginny took a second, then raised hers as, reluctantly, did Lee. Angelina turned to him beseechingly. "Please, remember what I said—"

"Fine," said George abruptly. "If I'm not wanted, I'll go." He pocketed his wand and walked off the field, taking less than a minute to disappear into the trees.

The silence continued until Parvati spoke. "Ron, I'm sorry, I didn't mean any offense. I know this isn't easy for you."

"It's okay," he said sadly. "Maybe this needed to happen, maybe it had to be everybody. He clearly wasn't going to listen to just one person, not even Harry."

“We tried,” said Angelina, her voice heavy with emotion. “He wouldn’t listen to us either.”

“Look, we all know George,” said Ron. “At least, who he usually is. We just have to hope, to wait, until he gets back to being that person again. In the meantime... he’s still here, he still needs to eat, to sleep someplace... we can’t avoid him. We can only hope that a lack of contact, less than before, will give him time to figure out what’s going on, to think it through. And unfortunately, there’s not a damn thing we can do in the meantime. So, let’s get back to the lesson. Hermione?”

* * * * *

The lesson over, Ron and Hermione led the group across the grassy field to the eating area. Usually dinner preparations were well underway by this time—with one and a half hours until the usual dinnertime—but there was no sign of any activity, and neither Luna nor Cho was there. Curious, Ron walked toward the preparation area, only to see Luna half-run, half-stumble out of the trees into view, heading straight for the tents. To Ron’s shock, she seemed to be sobbing.

“Luna!”

She continued in the same direction, not even giving him a glance. Ron looked back at Hermione and the others, who were close enough to see what Ron had seen. Ron broke into a trot towards Luna as she entered her tent; Hermione was close behind Ron. Not bothering to knock, Ron entered.

From the doorway, Ron could see Luna, who had just flopped onto the bed face down, still crying. Ron walked over to the side of her bed and knelt. “Luna?”

“What’s going on?” he heard Cho say from the other side of the wall which separated the beds; she then came over to Luna’s side and stood near Hermione at the end of the bed.

“Luna... what happened?”

Trying to control herself, she wiped the tears from her face. "It's nothing, it's not important. I'll be okay."

"Luna, it is important. I'm in charge here, and I need to know what happened. I'm not leaving you alone until you tell me."

She rolled onto her side, facing him; the tears had almost stopped. "I was... going out there to get some chickens, to prepare for tonight's meal. When I got out there, I saw him... using the Propulsion charm on the chickens. He'd push one across the yard, it would go twenty yards across, a few yards off the ground, and struggle to land... they're just chickens, they don't know why he's doing it..."

Ron sighed in frustration. It was hardly a capital offense, but his bad behavior was escalating. What would be next? It had to stop. He looked up at Hermione, who was clearly concerned, and was surprised to see Cho roll her eyes. "That idiot," he breathed. "Did he see you?" She shook her head. Ron stood and headed for the door.

"What are you going to do?" asked Hermione.

"What I think Harry would do if he were here," he answered as he left.

He jogged through the heavily wooded area that was between the living area and the livestock, which were confined to a particular area through cleverly designed natural barriers. Three minutes later he slowed down as in the distance, through the trees, he saw a chicken fly through the air. He continued walking, pulling out his wand as he did so.

Now in sight of George, though not yet seen, Ron spoke. "Having fun?"

George shrugged. "It's not Zonko's, but it passes the time. You're in charge of gathering dinner now? Taking this authority thing a bit far, aren't you?"

"Luna was here, she saw you. She ran back in tears."

George seemed genuinely surprised. "She can kill them, but gets all teary over giving them a joyride? Well, she always was strange."

Ron opened his mouth to debate George's use of the term 'joyride,' then quickly decided it wouldn't be worth it. "You're going to stop this."

George looked at Ron for the first time. "I am, am I?"

"Yes, you are."

"And how will this most impressive deed be accomplished?"

"You really want to be daring people to do something about you? I'd have been very happy to leave you alone, but you're clearly going to go stirring up any hornet's nest you can find. I actually think if there was one on the island, you'd knock it over."

"These aren't hornets, and I don't see what I'm hurting."

"I don't intend to have a debate with you about abuse of animals—"

"Abuse?" George exclaimed incredulously. "Would you rather be propulsed, or eaten? I wouldn't take long making the choice, believe me!"

"What reasonable people do you know that fling defenseless livestock around for the sake of entertainment?"

"Well, there's not much to do—"

"Look, I've been as tolerant as I can—"

"I'm not asking for any favors from—"

"But this is going to end, now! Do you understand?"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Don't make me—"

"I am making you! What are you going to do?"

I can't believe it's come to this, thought Ron. "I'll get as many people as necessary, and physically confine you to your tent if I have to! But don't—"

Ron cut himself off as George Disapparated. Swearing, he ran back to the main area at full speed. Panting as he arrived, he shouted, "Is he here?"

"George?" asked Hermione. "No, why?"

"He just Disapparated. I'm afraid he's... Hermione, do the locator!"

She took out her wand, held it up, and turned 360 degrees. Her eyes went wide. "Not on the island."

"Damn it." To the others, who except for Luna were crowded around, he said, "The ban on Apparition is temporarily lifted. Come with me, to the Portkey."

Ron Disapparated, and was soon standing next to the Portkey, along with a dozen others. The Portkey was a smooth wooden bar, with chains on either side that went into the earth. Ron pointed a wand and did the detection spell, the only one he knew. A puff of bright red smoke appeared to emanate from the Portkey. He cringed. "He did it. Very recently."

"This is bad, isn't it," said Corner.

"Very bad," agreed Ron. "It could be catastrophic. I'm thinking we have to go after him. Any ideas?"

"What good would it do?" asked Hermione. "He could easily be miles away by now, never mind when we get there. And our being there adds to the risk."

"I'd say having an antisocial chicken-tosser running around over there is such a high risk we wouldn't add much to it," Ron argued. "Unless

you give me a better argument than that, we're going, and soon. We could get lucky, find him with the locator spell."

"Would he really take that risk, go back to England?" asked Hermione anxiously. "If he just stays in Australia, that's one thing. Maybe he just needs to get away. But if he doesn't go..."

Lee spoke somberly. "He admitted to me, a week ago, that he'd had thoughts of going, trying to save Fred—"

Ron's anxiety and frustration vented at Lee. "And you didn't think this was worth mentioning?"

"I was going to—"

"When?"

"Ron!" shouted Hermione. "Now's not the time for that! We have to focus on the here and now."

"Okay. After what Lee said, it seems more like we have to go, and now. Any specific objections?"

"Wait, wait, wait!" pleaded Hermione in an increasingly high-pitched tone. "Just one minute, to think!" Ron took a deep breath and nodded.

After a half-minute of silence, Hermione spoke again. "Kingsley would have thought of this," she said, her tone suggesting her conviction. "He would have considered all possibilities, and with how George was acting, this would be one. And, he's the one who set up the Portkey. What would he—"

"Spell analysis!" exclaimed Terry, pointing his wand at the Portkey.

"He'll have shielded it," said Hermione doubtfully.

"Apparently not," said Terry. Now appearing, at the behest of Terry's spell, were two light blue lines, originating with a thick end at the Portkey, tapering off to a thin end, clearly in order to point a direction.

One pointed towards the camp; the other, towards the ocean, in a roughly southwest direction.

“A multidirectional Portkey! Impressive,” said Hermione. “One to camp, one to... Australia.”

“I’ve never even heard of this kind of Portkey,” said Ron, still clearly not wanting to waste any time. “What does it mean? It goes two ways?”

Terry nodded. “It chooses which way you go according to criteria set up by the spellcaster. Unfortunately, it seems my analysis spell isn’t good enough to detect that criteria. Hermione, you try.”

She pointed her wand, and there appeared the blue arrows, as well as a swirling combination of red, blue, and green rising up from the Portkey. Her eyebrows went high. “A medical spell!”

Ron frowned. “But what does it mean?”

Hermione and Terry exchanged a look of understanding. “It’s a spell that gathers information about a person’s medical condition,” explained Terry. “Heart beat, blood pressure, lots of other things. If a person badly needed medical care, this spell would detect it.”

The answer now dawned on Ron. “Wow, very clever. So, you’re only supposed to take the Portkey if you’re in bad medical shape, or the person you’re holding onto is. If you are, it sends you to Australia. If you’re not, it sends you back to camp. But... the locator said George wasn’t on the island!”

“Or,” said Hermione, “he’s in a place that’s shielded from detection by a locator spell, which is not difficult to do. I’d bet anything that he’s in one of the tents—Harry’s, Kingsley’s, or the other spare one—delivered there by the Portkey, and the tent is set to automatically set up a Confinement field. If I’m right, George is in custody now, in a tent, unable to leave.”

“Why didn’t Kingsley tell us?” wondered Padma.

“Another test,” suggested Neville. “He wanted to see if we’d go after the person who took the Portkey when he shouldn’t have. Grab that Portkey, and we end up with him until Kingsley comes back.”

Impressed, Ron said to Hermione, “Well, it’s a good thing somebody suggested taking a minute to think about things.” She smiled a little, but said nothing. “Okay, back to camp. We have to make sure he’s there. Nobody but me checks the tents.”

Ron opened the door to Kingsley’s tent first, and discovered that his guess was right: George was lying on the bed on the left side of the room. “George, what are you doing?”

George’s tone was defiant, “Just hanging out here. What’s it to you?”

Ron shrugged. Making sure to stay out of the room, he replied, “Well, it is Kingsley’s tent.”

“He can throw me out when he gets back.”

Ron nodded. “Okay, then.” He started to close the door.

George spoke up before he could. “I’d like dinner delivered at six.”

Nice try, thought Ron. He can’t leave, but doesn’t want to admit it. “You can come out and get your dinner like everyone else.”

“Wait, Ron?” said George, adopting a more reasonable tone. “Would you come in here for a minute?”

Knew this was coming, thought Ron. I sure hope Hermione was right. He took a few steps into the room, standing near George’s bed. “Yes?”

George paused, then shook his head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Ron tried not to react. He didn’t even have a good excuse prepared, thought Ron, just a ‘never mind.’ Trying to appear mildly annoyed at George’s change of mind, he said, “Okay, whatever.” He turned, walked, and fortunately was not stopped by any kind of magical

barrier. Half expecting to be called again once George realized that Ron could leave, he paused for a beat on the way out, then shut the door behind him.

Five minutes later, everyone on the island except for George and Luna sat at the large table. Ron went over the events since practice had stopped, though most everyone knew them anyway. "So, he asked me to step inside the tent, clearly to hope to entrap me there too," Ron concluded. "I imagine he thought that if I was stuck in there, people would work hard to get me out, maybe try to break the spell if it could be broken, whereas if it was just him, nobody would try."

"Are we going to try?" asked Corner, clearly not hoping for an affirmative answer.

"I don't see what benefit that would be," said Ron sadly. "It's not as though I want to keep him locked up, but I think we all know that disrupting our lives here is one thing, but using the Portkey without permission is really another. We all know it's there only for dire emergencies. There are two possibilities. One is that he used it just to get away, even if not to do anything further, which is a trivial reason to take that kind of risk. The other is that he actually wants to go back to England to do something to prevent Fred's death, which would be... reckless and irresponsible on such a large scale that it boggles the mind. Either way, he's shown he can't be trusted."

"So we just lock him up?" said Angelina, with a tone that implied that Ron was taking the easy way out of the problem.

Ron took mild umbrage. "You think this is easy for me? He's my older brother, I care about him and I respect him. This is painful. He's a better person than this, I'm sure of it. But I just can't think of anything else to do." He looked at his sister significantly, inviting her to comment.

She shook her head slowly. "What he said."

"Lee, you said he had talked to you about going back to save Fred," said Ron. "How serious did he seem?"

Lee looked uncomfortable. "Serious enough, apparently. I didn't say anything because at the time, I thought it was just mouthing off. He and Fred used to do that sometimes, talk about things they wanted to do that weren't really going to happen." Ron nodded, having had the same experience himself. "It took them a long time, two years ago, to convince me that they were really going to open a shop," Lee continued. "So, I just hoped that he was blowing off steam."

"He did say, at some point, that he thought it was defensible even given the dangers, which he said were, 'speculation' was the word he used. He pointed out, correctly, that Harry himself admitted that the dangers he mentioned were theoretical, that nobody could really know what would happen if history were changed. His attitude seemed to be that he was dismissing the dangers."

"Justification," said Corner. "Just what Kingsley talked about. You want to do something that you know you shouldn't do, and you come up with reasons why it's okay to do it. I mean, it shouldn't take a genius to figure out that changing what we all know happened, you're dealing with some pretty heavy stuff here. And even if reality didn't tear itself apart, he doesn't know he wouldn't change the situation so Voldemort wins instead of loses, it's so unpredictable—"

Annoyed, Lee cut him off. "Okay, we get it."

With a glare, Corner shot back, "I don't think it's unreasonable to go over in some detail what he could've done, probably would have done, if Kingsley hadn't had the foresight to do what he did, when considering what to do about him—"

Much more gently than Lee, Ron interrupted him. "Michael... I think we can stipulate to what I said before, that it was reckless and irresponsible, and that the scale is huge. We all take it seriously."

"So, as I was saying, I don't know if we could break Kingsley's spell if we tried, but considering what almost happened, I don't see any choice but to leave him where he is. When Harry comes back, it'll be his decision what to do."

"I assume," said Angelina, "that we're going to bring him some food, at least."

"Well, we haven't even eaten yet," pointed out Corner, with a glance at Cho.

"What are you looking at me for?" she said defensively. "Luna was supposed to be handling it today."

"What were you doing?" asked Corner.

"Nothing I have to explain to you!" she retorted indignantly. "Harry asked me to come here for medical reasons, in my capacity as a Healer-in-training. Not to be a cook. I volunteered to help Luna out for a while while she got started on how to do this, and I thought she'd be okay today. I guess it's not a good idea to get emotionally attached to the food."

Ron wasn't thrilled about that last shot, but didn't want to fan the flames of another personal conflict. "We'll have the miniaturized food tonight," he said. "I'll talk to Luna later, make sure she thinks she can handle it tomorrow. And, what Cho does is between her and Harry. Or, I guess, her and me while Harry isn't here."

"You know, Cho, I didn't mean any offense," Corner clarified. "It's just that, you know, I kind of liked your cooking."

This coaxed a small grin from Cho as a few people chuckled. "Thank you. I don't mean I'll never cook again, but there are things I want to get done here."

Hermione spoke up. "I was thinking of recommending to Harry, once he gets back, that he consider having all of us take turns learning how to do the food. I mean, what if Cho and Luna both got sick?"

"Or, decided to take the Portkey and leave the island," cracked Corner.

Ron saw Lee and Angelina bristle, and jumped in quickly. "Michael, let's not do that, okay? I know you don't know him that well, but the

more we like him, the sadder we are about this. Let's not make it worse."

"He got away with saying plenty more than that over the past few weeks."

"He got away with it, yes," agreed Ron. "But was he respected when he was saying it?"

Corner's expression showed that he hadn't thought of it that way. Deflating slightly, he nodded. "Got it."

"Any problem with visiting him?" asked Angelina. "Or bringing him dinner? Or are you going to deny him food until he admits that he can't come out?"

"Part of me wants to," Ron admitted, "because he tried to trap me in there with him. But no, no objections to that, or visiting him. But no attempts are to be made to bring down the confinement spell, or anything else that would help him get out. Okay?"

There were many nods. "Are you going to talk to him?" asked Lee.

Ron thought about it. "I think it's better if I don't," he said. "He'd make it seem as though I was his jailer, do a big guilt thing on me. Considering his attitude towards authority, and I'm the closest thing to it right now, I shouldn't talk to him unless he has something he really wants to say to me, and is also willing to listen. Otherwise, it would aggravate the situation more than it would help."

The meeting broke up soon afterwards, and after dinner, Ron and Hermione went back to their tent. They lay down on his bed next to each other, him holding her. "I hate this," he muttered.

"I know," she said. "You're doing all you can do."

"What little that is. What in the world happened to him?"

"Ron..." She looked up into his eyes. "If I'd died fighting Voldemort, would you come back for me?"

He exhaled. "I'm sorry, but no."

"Don't be sorry, you shouldn't," she said quickly. "I'd hope you wouldn't. Would you think about it?"

He paused. "For a few seconds, certainly. But never as anything serious. If only from a practical point of view, like Michael said, I'd be likelier to make things worse. But even if I thought I could save you, at the cost of what it would do... no. You?"

She shook her head. "No. But there's one thing I know from history: emotion can overpower reason, and that's what causes lots of wars, riots, and so forth."

He nodded solemnly. "It's a lot like the Auror Leader test, isn't it?"

"The basic concept, yes. In George's case, there are several important differences. George has plenty of time to consider it, whereas Harry had to make the decision in under a minute. With George it's one person; with Harry, the five most important people in his life. And Harry was offered a 100% chance of success, whereas George would have a high chance of failing; all of these factors make Harry's choice more tempting. If George could do it by pushing a button, I think he'd have done it by now."

"Really seems like a cruel test."

"And that's why Harry's got the power he has," she observed. "Let me ask you... I think you'd have told me, but have you watched Harry's Auror Leader memories in the Pensieve?"

"No. You?"

"No, I haven't. But I was thinking, maybe we should."

"I find myself not wanting to," he admitted. "It's going to be awful. But then of course the next thing that comes to my mind..."

“Is that we would only be watching it, but he had to live through it,” she finished for him.

“Yeah.”

He moved his head down to kiss her gently on the lips. “I’m very glad to have you to talk to about stuff like this.”

She nodded. “Me, too.”

“I wish he had someone.”

“I think he will.”

“And I hope it’s not Cho.”

She smiled. “Yes, she wasn’t very nice to Luna, was she.”

“No. I feel like... Luna’s a puppy. She’s cute, and—I mean, her personality—“

“I know what you mean.”

“She’s cute, and friendly, and innocent, like she could never imagine that anyone would do her harm, or would do anyone harm. And then when Cho acts snide with her like that, it’s like kicking a puppy. I really don’t like it.”

“No, I didn’t either.”

“Okay, she’s strange. But that’s part of her charm.”

She looked up at him mischievously. “What’s my charm?”

He grinned. “It’s hard to pick one thing. You’re just... Hermione.”

She feigned annoyance. “Is that supposed to be an answer?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

Now, she smiled. "All right, then."

* * * * *

The next week went by in relative calm. Hermione started to wake up a little early to help Luna gather food for, and prepare, breakfast. On the first day, she watched Luna earnestly talk to the chickens for at least fifteen minutes, then was surprised as several of them moved closer to her. (They rebuffed Hermione's attempts, scattering every time she got close.) Hermione discovered a way to use a simple spell to separate some of the females from the males, so the group could have eggs every morning. Parvati and Padma started helping in the evening, prompting several humorous debates about why none of the men had offered to pitch in.

After dinner, everyone was sitting around the main table chatting when they were startled by two Apparition sounds. Kingsley and Hestia appeared, Kingsley supporting an obviously groggy Harry with an arm around his back.

"Harry!" shouted Hermione, jumping from her seat to run to greet him as everyone stood. "Are you okay?" Cho moved close to him, wand out, clearly doing a medical check.

"He's fine," said Kingsley.

"I'll be okay," agreed Harry. "Just need to wake up a bit."

"What happened?" Hermione asked. "We assumed this was a test. Was it?"

"Not my idea," he said, rubbing his head. "How long have I been out?"

"Ten days," said Hermione. Harry's eyebrows went high, but he didn't comment.

"Yes, it was a test," Kingsley confirmed. "Harry will decide later when and how debriefings will be done. What's the current status?"

Ron spoke up. "George tried to take the Portkey. He's now in Kingsley's tent." Harry winced. "Yeah, we weren't happy about it either."

"Anything else?" asked Harry.

"I'd think that's enough," said Ron wryly. "But no, nothing major."

"We missed you," volunteered Hermione.

Harry smiled a little. "Thanks. I didn't have a chance to miss you, though."

"You've been unconscious all this time?" asked Cho, still examining him.

"I guess so," he said. "The last thing I remember was eating dinner."

Most everyone was now in a loose semicircle facing him. "What are you going to do about George?" asked Corner.

"First, spend some time thinking about it," responded Harry, unable to stop himself from giving Corner a mildly reproachful glance for not having considered what Harry thought was an obvious answer. "Kingsley, can I see you in my tent?"

Harry had recovered enough to make it under his own power. They walked in and sat on the sofa. "Before you start," said Kingsley, "there's something I want to say. Some part of this was also a test for you, and it's a test that right now, by my reckoning, you didn't pass."

Very surprised, he queried Kingsley with a look. "Out there," Kingsley continued, "you told a very skillful lie. You said it wasn't your idea, which is literally true. I suggested it. But it gives the impression that you didn't approve the test, which is not true."

"I won't test you further by seeing if you'll lie to me about this or not; that's not really important. I will tell you that I'm aware that you can see spells. Your eyes tracked a test spell I shot in front of you at dinner. Then I put the knockout spell into your food, which you

avoided until the end of the meal, giving you time to decide whether you'd do it or not. You could have easily avoided it. But you took it, preserving the option to let the trainees think that you had nothing to do with the decision. I think the better thing to do would have been to not take it, and either not do it, or do it later and take responsibility for it."

Concentrating, Harry took a minute to think it through. "What is it that you think would be wrong with letting them have the impression that I didn't consent to it?"

"Why do you want them to have that impression?" countered Kingsley.

"I asked you first," retorted Harry humorously.

Kingsley didn't smile, nor did he seem annoyed. "My answer does have some relationship to yours. On the surface, it seems that you don't want to take responsibility for your actions, which is a very generalized moral failing. What you did amounts to a lie—"

"I didn't lie," Harry protested.

"I said 'amounts to,' not 'literally is,' responded Kingsley. "I believe that morally, it's the same thing. You intentionally conveyed an impression that was not true, and I strongly feel that falling back on the notion that words that were not true did not escape your lips is nothing more than a legalism. Think about it from your point of view. If someone you trusted lies to you through omission, misdirection, or implication, you won't feel any less betrayed.

"Lying, conveying a false impression, or however you do it is morally questionable, never mind the practical aspects of the possibility of being found out, and not having a good answer to the question, 'why did you let us believe something that wasn't true.'"

"I thought I didn't have to explain myself," Harry said. It wasn't a serious argument; he threw it out there to see how Kingsley would respond.

Kingsley rolled his eyes ever so briefly. “You don’t. But you’re much better off always assuming that someone else can always see the truth of any situation. Or, as one of the departed Aurors used to put it, ‘Don’t lie, because then you’ll never be in the position of having to remember which lie you told, and if you tell the same lie over and over, you’ll start to believe it yourself.’

Kingsley paused, then spoke again. “Your Aurors don’t have a right to the unadulterated truth of anything they might want to know, but they also have a right not to be lied to without an extremely compelling reason. More importantly, if they lose their trust in you, your authority won’t be the same. They’ll still follow your orders, but some of them won’t follow you in their hearts, and that’s important. Passing the Auror Leader test earned you a huge amount of moral capital. You don’t want to squander it by lying, especially when it isn’t close to being necessary. You always want to be as honest with them as possible. ‘I don’t want to talk about that’ is often a reasonable answer. But lying almost never is.”

Harry decided to give it a lot more thought before answering. “Okay. I’ll think about what you said.”

Kingsley nodded. “You asked to see me. Was it about this, or was there something else?”

“What do you think should be done about George?”

“That depends a lot on exactly what happened, which you and I don’t know yet,” Kingsley pointed out.

“What do we do if he still won’t cooperate?” asked Harry. “Never mind his being an Auror, I just don’t want him disrupting things. Is keeping him confined for a year really an option?”

“It may end up being what we would call the least bad option. Sometimes you’ll simply have no good choices. And as an aside, you asked ‘what if he still won’t cooperate.’ As a general matter, it’s unproductive to spend time wondering what to do if he won’t cooperate when you have the ability to find out whether he will. So,

you find out, and when you have the information, go from there. Only do 'what if' when you can't get any more information right then."

Kingsley was right, Harry reflected, but it could get annoying to be called on every minor mental lapse. After that thought, he recalled again the awesome responsibility he held, and that a mental lapse, or a waste of time thinking unproductively, could cause damage or even cost lives. A light sigh escaped him.

"Harry, a lot of times I'm going to say something like that, that could be seen as nit-picking," said Kingsley, making Harry aware that he'd shown his feelings more than he'd intended. "But I'm—"

"You're trying to get me to think more productively, more efficiently," Harry said; Kingsley seemed a little surprised. "You want me to adopt certain patterns of thinking. I understand, and I don't mean you're wrong. It's just... difficult."

Kingsley nodded sympathetically; Harry could see flickers of uncertainty in his eyes. "And sometimes I feel a little bad about being the one to hold your feet to the fire on that, because again, it's because of me that you're here. But I suppose that's something we both have to get past. We are where we are, and we need to do what we need to do. You need to become the best Auror Leader you can be, and I need to help you to do that. I emphasize the moral and character aspects so much because Auror Leader is such a unique position, and the authority derives from moral authority. Morals and character are important for Aurors in general, much more so for the Auror Leader. Patterns of thinking are important; patterns of moral behavior, much more so. We might have a habit of asking 'what if' when we don't need to; we might have a habit of telling a small lie when we think we can get away with it. Habits and patterns are hard to break."

"I guess so. I wonder if you focus on the moral aspects of Aurors so much because... I wouldn't be Auror Leader right now if several Aurors hadn't gone off the rails, morally speaking."

It was clear from Kingsley's reaction that the thought hadn't occurred to him. "I think they're extremely important no matter what, but that's

not bad. There may be something to what you say. I was... I was going to say, disappointed, that so many Aurors went morally wrong, but I guess 'angry' might be a better word, if I'm honest with myself. I was also angry that more didn't go on the run with those of us who did, so maybe I'm less inclined to view them charitably. Sure, they were put in tough situations. Voldemort's people turned the heat up on them slowly, compromised them a little at a time, then when they ask you to do the big thing, it doesn't seem so bad. You've already done stuff you knew was wrong, so now it's just a matter of degree."

Harry nodded. "Spencer."

Kingsley's eyebrows went high. "You mentioned him after the test. What do you know?"

"Everything. In the test, I was asking older Aurors for advice. He told me the story. Basically, don't let yourself get compromised, even a little."

"Amazing, that the test can do that. But yes, in real life, he confessed to me. I forgave him, as much as anyone can in this life. If they hadn't died, I would've encouraged you not to fire him."

"He thought what he did was unforgivable."

"He clearly hadn't forgiven himself, anyway," agreed Kingsley.

"They told him he had to... have sex with—"

"Rape," corrected Kingsley.

"I don't like to call it that, because he was coerced—"

"Most people would agree with you," said Kingsley. "But I'm confident that I would die rather than do that. I'm confident that you would, too. I hold Aurors to higher standards. He had a highly unappealing choice, but it was a choice. In my mind, not calling it rape is a step on the way to justifying it."

“Well, anyway... I was thinking of, at some point, telling the trainees about it, the whole story, to illustrate how you can be compromised like that.”

“Not a bad idea. But no names.”

Harry nodded. “Of course.”

“So, how are you going to approach the George situation?”

“I was going to talk to Ron and Hermione first, then Lee and Angelina. And anyone else who it seems like I should, based on what the others say. After I’ve gotten all the information I can, then it’s time to talk to him. Did you have something in mind?”

Kingsley shook his head. “Just keep in mind what I’ve been saying, about character and psychology. To deal with George in the best way, you have to try to get inside his head, think like you think he would. The more you do that, the better off you’ll be, and he’ll be. Especially keep it in mind when you talk to Lee and Angelina; they may be able to provide you with the best window into his mind right now.”

As he considered how he would handle this difficult situation, Harry reflected that it was likely that, difficult as this problem seemed, it would probably appear easy by comparison to what problems he would face in the future.

An hour and a half later, just having finished talking with Lee and Angelina, Harry stretched out on his sofa and thought about what to do. Rather, he thought about what he had already decided to do, to see if he needed to talk himself out of it. The decision had formed in his mind as he had talked to George’s two closest friends. He knew he would be questioned and criticized, but at the same time, he would ask nobody else’s opinion or permission. This was a decision he would have to make by himself.

After a few minutes, he realized that he wasn’t going to change his mind, and decided to get it over with. He Apparated to the Portkey, pointed his wand at it, and Apparated back to his tent. Disillusioning the thing he wanted to take with him, he hovered it alongside him as

he left his tent. Aware of the eyes on him—most of the group were gathered at the main table—he walked the short distance to Kingsley's tent. Deciding not to knock, he opened the door and entered.

“George.”

Lying on the bed reading, George looked up. “Harry! Well, look who's back. Have a nice rest?”

Harry had already decided not to banter with George, or respond to any provocations. “I just got back from the Portkey. I turned off its special features. It's now an ordinary Portkey, going to Australia.”

George sat up. Very surprised, but trying not to appear it, he asked, “And you tell me this because...”

“It's my intention to let you out of here.”

Now George didn't try to hide his surprise. “And you're giving me your permission to go to Australia?”

Harry shook his head sadly. “You clearly don't need my permission, having already tried to do that. You've shown your intention not to follow my authority, so I'm not going to try to persuade you of anything. You know what's involved. There's nothing more I can say to you that you don't know.”

George eyed Harry carefully, clearly suspicious. “If I go, will you come after me?”

Expressionless, Harry shook his head again. “No. No one else will leave the island, unless they're critically ill.”

Now George appeared to be getting angry. “You think you're calling my bluff,” he said. “I will go, if you let me out.”

“I won't stop you.”

“Why?”

"I very much don't want to keep you prisoner in here for eleven months."

"You'll let me go wreck the world?"

"You'll do what you'll do."

"But you think I won't do it, or else you wouldn't let me out."

"I'm not Professor Trelawney, and I don't have a crystal ball. It's your decision."

George held Harry's gaze, apparently trying to read him. "You're weird."

"I've heard that," agreed Harry.

"Okay. So, let me out."

"I will. But there's one thing I need you to do first."

George's eyes narrowed. "And what's that?"

Harry lifted the Disillusionment spell, and hovered the Pensieve to rest on the nightstand next to the bed on which George sat. "I need you to watch this. It takes about an hour."

Harry could feel George's hostility. "Why?"

"Not explaining myself."

"You think this'll impress me?" Harry stared back impassively, silently.

George's turbulent emotions played subtly across his face. "And if I don't?"

"Then this is your home for the next eleven months."

"I thought you 'very much' didn't want to do that."

"I don't. But these are my terms. Take it or leave it."

George motioned towards the Pensieve. "This has some magical spell on it? Or you'll do some spell to change my mind while I'm in there?"

Harry shook his head. "No magic will be done to you. By me, that, or anyone on the island."

George was silent for a minute, then looked up at Harry angrily. "Are you having fun?"

Determined not to betray any expression, Harry struggled to suppress a wince; already in emotional distress at having to take such action against a valued friend, Harry was stung by George's question. "You have no idea."

Furiously, George lunged toward the Pensieve. His head broke the surface, and his body was still. Harry sat in one of the chairs near the room's sofa, took a book out of his robes, and read.

An hour later, Harry stood and walked a few steps toward the Pensieve; he could see beneath the surface nothing but darkness, and assumed that in the Pensieve Harry was stumbling through the cave; a shiver went through him at the memory. Shouldn't be long now.

Two minutes later, George's head slowly emerged from the Pensieve. Despite a tear rolling down his left cheek, he looked even angrier than before. Having already deactivated the Confinement spell, Harry stood next to the door and opened it. "Go ahead."

George stopped on reaching the door, and turned to face Harry. By the fury in George's eyes, Harry would have known what was coming without the extra sense. He steeled himself not to react.

"Self-righteous bastard!" George spat loudly, and delivered a backhand blow with his right hand that hit Harry on the right side of his face, near the eye. George left the tent, took a step outside, and

Disapparated as Harry followed him out, the door still open. The door being in full view of the main table outside, most everyone stood and rushed over to Harry.

“Harry! Are you all right?” asked Cho, taking out her wand.

He was shaken by the blow, but much more by what he’d had to do. “I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding!” said Padma. As she spoke, Cho sealed the cut with her wand, then got rid of the blood with another wave. “Well, not anymore,” she added.

“He thinks he can take a whack at you and then go away?” asked Ron incredulously. “Where’s he going to go?”

Still expressionless, Harry said, “Before I talked to him, I reset the Portkey.”

As he expected, everyone was flabbergasted. “You did what?” gasped Kingsley.

“He’s probably gone by now,” added Harry, turning to walk away.

“Harry!” said Kingsley urgently. “Permission to go after—“

“No.”

“But—“

“I said no!” responded Harry, raising his voice but not shouting.

“I’d like to talk to you—“

“No. This is my decision, and it’s done. Kingsley, go to the Portkey. If he’s already gone through, reset it back to the security setting. If not, do nothing. If you see him—if anyone sees him—you’re not to interfere with him, and you’re not to follow him.”

Kingsley stared at him intently; five seconds passed as no one spoke. Meeting Kingsley's gaze, Harry said calmly, "I can have Hermione do it." Kingsley touched his wand and Disapparated.

Hermione rushed up to him. "Harry, what happened?"

"I'll talk about it tomorrow," he said tonelessly. "Not right now."

He pointed his wand into the tent; the Pensieve came floating out, and it followed him as he took the short walk to his tent. "Oh, my God," he heard Hermione sob as he walked in.

"What?" asked Cho. "Why did he have that?"

With his new hearing, Harry could continue to listen, and he did. They were clearly walking away. He sat on his sofa, and heard an Apparition sound. "He's gone," said Kingsley.

"Why did he have the Pensieve in there?" repeated Cho.

"He and George were in there for an hour," said Hermione, still emotionally affected. "That's how long it takes to watch it. Harry must have told George—"

"That he'd let him out if he watched the Auror Leader test," finished an awed Kingsley. "Oh, Merlin..."

"But why?" asked Corner. "What good does that do?"

"Harry," said Kingsley, "clearly believes that George won't do it. Harry is essentially saying to George, 'You really want to do it? Do you really want to destroy the timeline, maybe undo Voldemort's defeat, cause catastrophic consequences? Okay, go ahead.' There's nothing to stop George except himself, his own conscience. And making him view his test, that was, 'This is what I did, what I suffered, for society. What are you going to do?' That's just..." Kingsley trailed off.

"It's kind of... cold, in a strange way," said Neville. "It's kind of like an Auror Leader test."

"It's different in several important ways," pointed out Kingsley, "the main one of which is that George has time. In the test, you have literally less than a minute to make this decision; that's what makes it so hard. If you had all the time you wanted, more people would pass. The time pressure is what tells the tale of what kind of person you are."

"That, and it's so easy to save them," added Ron. "Just push a button."

"You watched it?" asked a surprised Kingsley.

"A few days ago," said Ron. "Hermione and I. She was bawling, and I'm not ashamed to say I shed a few tears, too. And that's something I'd otherwise never admit. I think if you watch that and you don't cry, something's wrong with you."

"It's so terrible," added Hermione, still sounding weepy. "His parents were such nice people, and he loved them so much..." Harry could hear her sniffing.

After a silence, Kingsley spoke again. "Neville, you said it was cold in a way, and I think that's true. But at the same time, it's an extremely honorable thing to do. George must be fighting a war with himself, the part that wants to rescue Fred against the part that knows he shouldn't. Harry is saying he's sure that the right side will win, and he's giving George the chance to find that out for himself. If he'd kept George locked up for the year, George would never have found out. And he'd have never again been trusted by anyone here. Now, he gets a chance to redeem himself before that can happen."

"I can see that," said Neville. "But I kind of meant the making-him-watch part rather than the whole thing."

"Yes, but at the same time, it's what I heard in the Muggle world called 'tough love.' Harry wants George to make the right decision, and is reminding him of the stakes involved. It was for George's own good, I'd say. His comment about 'self-righteous bastard' suggests what he thinks about Harry's motivations, but I think with time, he'll understand Harry's reasons."

"What if George actually does it?" asked Corner.

"Then... disaster, mayhem, our timeline winks out of existence and we were never here, like that. Maybe."

"Oh, that's comforting," said Dean.

"But maybe not," added Kingsley. "We just don't know."

"He won't do it," said Lee.

"How sure of that are you?" asked Ron.

"I'm sure." There was a pause. "Pretty sure." Another pause. "Fairly sure."

After another pause, Corner said sarcastically, "Oh, don't stop there. Do go on."

"No, I'm okay stopping there."

"What do you think about what he did?" asked Ron. Listening, Harry couldn't tell who was being asked. He guessed it was Kingsley, and he was right.

"As you know, I'm his Devil's Advocate. One thing that means is that you won't hear criticisms from me of anything he does. Only he'll hear them, if I have them to offer.

"I will say about this that there's not much to be said about it from a practical point of view. He made this decision without my input, and I can see why: it's a moral decision, and if this is what you think is right, there's nothing to debate. It's not as though he doesn't know what's at stake."

"But doesn't this sort of go against the whole Auror Leader test ideas?" asked Neville. "I mean, in the test, you have to let your loved ones die so society can be saved. Harry's now risking society for... for George's soul, I guess you could say. To do what's best for

society, he should keep George locked up. Isn't what he's done opposite that?"

"I see why you say that," answered Kingsley, "but it's different in a number of ways. The main way is the certainty of events in the test, and the uncertainty of this situation. This is part of being a leader; you just have to make a call. The one he made says something about George, but it says even more about Harry. And I'll tell you one thing: I'd be an Auror under him in a second. This doesn't say anything about his judgment, but it says a lot about his heart. He's not going to sleep well until George comes back. He took this on himself for George's sake. If I were an Auror, I'd hope he had the faith in me that he has in George."

There was another silence; Harry decided to stop listening, and having stopped concentrating on it, heard nothing more. He hoped Kingsley would be wrong about his sleep. Then again, he thought wryly, if George interferes and the timeline vanishes, I won't have to worry about it.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 6, A Moral Imperative: Furious at what he considers Harry's attempt to manipulate him, George makes his way to Sydney Airport, planning to take the first plane to England to save his brother.

From Chapter 6: George read down the list, and saw 11:45, London, Qantas. Oh, maybe I'll take that one. Give time for the headache to go away, and also, that's the airline that never crashed. Be a bloody shame to die in a Muggle plane crash on the way back.

Chapter 6

A Moral Imperative

George's first reaction was to be surprised that while a second ago on the island it had been fully dark, now it was twilight. Guess it's farther away from the island than I thought. He was in the middle of a triangle formed by three large trees, probably as close together as three trees could be and survive. Low branches and tall grass provided as good cover from casual observation as could be hoped for.

Still furious, he started walking, not paying attention to where he was going. So, Harry wants to tell me that if I go back to try to save Fred, it'll be like letting the whole population of England die, like in the test. Bullshit. It doesn't have to be that way. His death wasn't necessary for Voldemort's defeat. If I can change things, if I can save him, life will just go on in roughly the same way, just with a few minor differences. Maybe I'll just disappear, and find myself in the shop with him, living the life we were supposed to live before this happened. Who's to say? A few thousand-year-old books? Bugger that.

He'd said the same thing to himself dozens of times over the past few weeks, and many times had given consideration to the counter-arguments. As time went by, he said it to himself more and more, and listened to the counter-arguments less and less. After being forced to watch the Auror Leader test, he now was able to ignore them. Harry didn't even try to talk me out of it, he just showed me that, hoping to guilt me out of it. You don't resort to that if you have a good argument to make.

He'd planned it out many times as he sat in his cell, as he'd come to think of Kingsley's tent over the past week. Do roughly what Harry did when he went to Japan. The only difference was, Harry hadn't cared where his plane was going, but George did. He too would take a Muggle plane, but he would have to go into a Muggle airport. First, he had to find a city, a Muggle city. Then get a map, then head to the nearest airport.

Fortunately, he had prepared—not before leaving Kingsley’s tent, but before his first attempt to leave the island. Well before the confrontation with Ron over the chickens, he’d prepared everything he could think of. He regretted that he hadn’t planned for the possibility in England before leaving; the thought of going back to rescue Fred hadn’t been a serious one until he’d arrived on the island. He’d considered snatching a few of the packages of miniaturized food, but Merlin only knew what devious spell Kingsley might have put on it. He didn’t have currency—he’d foreseen no need for it on the island—but he had a few valuable knickknacks that could be sold if necessary.

He took his shoulder bag out of his pocket; at two inches in length, it easily fit. He increased it to its natural size, reached in for his broom, then increased that as well. He Disillusioned himself, mounted the broom, and took off.

He had no idea where he was, but luck was on his side: no more than five minutes after he took off, he saw the coast, and the lights of a good-sized city. Another five minutes, and he was over the city. Concentrating on choosing a good place to land, he was almost unconscious of the rumbling noise near him. Finally it became loud enough that it occurred to him to look around to see where it was coming from. Right and left, nothing. He looked over his shoulder, and adrenaline surged through him at the sight of an airplane bearing down on him, far closer than was comfortable. He dived straight down, and didn’t look up until he heard the plane pass above him. He took a deep breath. Merlin, that was close. He wasn’t sure whether it would’ve hit him if he hadn’t seen it, but he was glad not to have to find out. Be ironic, he thought, to do all this and get killed myself, by something stupid.

Looking ahead, he saw the plane gradually descending, and it suddenly occurred to him that this was exactly what he was looking for. There must be an airport around here! Deciding to follow the plane, he quickly realized that he had no hope of keeping up with it. Fortunately, he could see by the angle of descent that the plane would be landing soon enough that he had no chance of losing sight of it. A few minutes later, he realized that he needn’t have worried, as the plane was making a wide turn, clearly circling to land. He looked down, and saw the airport that he hadn’t noticed before, having

already flown directly over it. Rolling his eyes at himself, he descended, looking for a spot as close to the main entrance as possible, yet out of sight.

The building wasn't as big as he would have guessed an airport might be, but he found a place, assisted by the encroaching darkness. He miniaturized his broom, put it in his bag, and walked in the front door under the large letters spelling out the words 'Rockhampton Airport.'

A desk near the entrance had an 'information' sign over it. Well, that's perfect. I need information. He walked up to the attractive young woman and smiled. "Hello. Can you tell me which plane goes to England?"

Smiling at first, she was suddenly taken slightly aback. "Uh, well, if you mean directly to England, we wouldn't have that. This isn't an international airport. Do you mean, a connecting flight to England?"

Not quite sure what she meant, George convincingly acted as though he'd just committed a mere slip of the tongue. "Yes, of course, that's what I meant. Do you have that?"

Smiling again now that she was less discomfited, she replied, "Yes, you're in luck. A flight to Sydney leaves in fifteen minutes; if you hurry, you can make it. Of course, you'd have to wait overnight in Sydney, the next flight would be tomorrow morning there."

"Yes, that's fine," agreed George. "Where do I go?"

"Well, you need to go to the Qantas counter over there," she said, gesturing, "to buy the ticket, then to Gate 4 in the departures wing."

Not buying anything, but she doesn't need to know that. "Thank you very much."

"Not at all. Have a nice day," she said cheerily as he walked away. Nice lass, he thought. Wonder if she fancied me. Now, do I just walk onto the plane, or pretend to buy a ticket? Depends on how crowded it is. Approaching the Qantas counter, he found that the plane was only half full. Perfect. No need for a ticket.

He quickly walked over to the gate, stood in a corner where he couldn't easily be observed, and surreptitiously pointed his wand at the wall. Using the highly useful spell he and Fred had learned at an early age, he was able to see through the wall into the hallway connecting the plane and the gate. Confident that he wasn't currently being observed, he Apparated to the spot he was looking at. He strode confidently onto the plane, then decided to use the restroom before sitting. If I wait until the last minute before sitting, then I won't take anyone else's seat. Blimey, these things are tiny, guess everything has to be small on a plane. Thank Merlin for brooms. Could've flown to Sydney on a broom, probably, just this is easier. Can just sit and relax.

The flight was slower than he'd imagined, taking an hour and a half. Amazing, he thought, that Muggles get around like this. If they had, or knew about, fireplaces, Portkeys, and so forth, this whole industry of airplanes would collapse. It takes so long, and don't these things crash sometimes? He was sure he'd heard about it. Picking up the magazine from the pouch on the back of the seat in front of him, he saw on the back an ad for Qantas, which emphasized its status as 'since the advent of the jet airplane, the only major airline to have zero accident fatalities.' Wow, he thought, what luck. I should see if I can get this airline to England.

Upon landing, he disembarked like any other passenger, cheerfully saying goodbye to the flight attendants. He found his way to an information desk, which confirmed that no more flights were leaving that evening, and that the earliest flights to England would be tomorrow at 10:30 a.m. The woman asked George if he wanted hotel information, but he declined, deciding it wasn't worth the trouble. Just for one night, he'd stay in the airport. Assuming they would clear the area as it got late, he planned to disillusion himself so he wouldn't be seen, but was surprised to see that the airport staff apparently had no objection to people spending the night in the terminal, as a dozen other travelers appeared to be doing the same thing. He wandered around the airport for over an hour taking in the unusual sights, then found a row of reasonably comfortable-looking chairs and lay flat across them.

Normally he had no trouble sleeping, and he reminded himself that as it was apparently a few hours earlier in Australia than on the island, it should be fairly late from his body clock's point of view, well past midnight. But he found he couldn't sleep. He attributed it to tension over the task ahead. He'd devoted considerable thought to it, but still hadn't finalized one plan of action. The absolutely safest plan—leaving a letter with Fred, a long one with unquestionable proof of identity, making the case for not joining the final battle—was also the potentially least effective, as Fred was likely to ignore it whether it was genuine or not. The most effective plan—wait until the night of the battle, go to Hogwarts, catch himself and Fred by surprise, stun them both, and make sure they could not join the battle—was the one that contained the most risk of detection. He was leaning towards that one, however.

He would drift off, then suddenly wake up, try again, and the same thing would happen. Finally, he fell asleep...

...and in his dream, he had taken his father's form with Polyjuice Potion. Catching up with himself and Fred on the day of the battle, he asked them to step aside with them to have a private word. "It's about your mother," he'd added, to be sure they agreed. Alone, he quickly Stunned both, Apparated them back to the shop, and secured them well. They would both be out until long after the battle.

He skipped the battle himself, as he knew it had been won, but decided to show up soon after he knew Harry should have defeated Voldemort, as indeed he had. Looking for Weasleys, he found them near the corpses of Percy, Bill, and his mother—

He bolted awake, sweating, heart pounding. Breathing heavily, he looked around and saw the same mostly-empty airport terminal he'd fallen asleep in, though the first rays of sunlight were coming through the windows. He cursed himself for having had the dream. It's not going to happen that way. It's because of Lee, all that stuff he said about unintended consequences. Just because I have a dream doesn't mean it's going to happen.

He looked at a clock and saw that it was 5:45 a.m.; he couldn't have slept for more than three hours. He tried to calm himself, and lay back

down on the chairs to see if he could get some more sleep. He fell in and out of fitful sleep and had a few mini-dreams, or if they were normal dreams he could only remember one scene: he and Fred were running the shop when Draco Malfoy, dressed in purple robes and a hood, came in to buy five dozen Canary Creams. "The Dark Lord loves them," Malfoy explained. "Not to eat himself, of course. He gives them to us, we become canaries, and he laughs and laughs. The Dark Lord always had an underappreciated sense of humor." When Fred asked about payment, Malfoy replied, part menacingly and part fearfully, "Send the bill to the Dark Lord... if you dare." He swept out of the shop as Fred and George exchanged a confused glance.

George awoke again, took a few seconds to register that it had only been a dream, and rolled his eyes. That was a weird one, he thought. How could it be that I succeed, but Voldemort lives, yet we're allowed to keep the shop? Never mind, it's all stupid anyway.

He was able to ignore that dream fairly quickly, and tucked his head under his arm to shut out the incoming sunlight. He was asleep again...

...and he burst into the Room of Requirement; the whole group was there, just before the battle. There were now two Georges in the room, and everyone looked at him. "He's an impostor!" shouted the other George.

"No, I'm not! Remember that time when you were six, you wet the bed and blamed Fred? No one else could know that—"

"Okay, you're not an impostor! But shut up!"

"You shouldn't be here," said Harry suspiciously. "This is all about me. I'm going to save everyone."

"No, I am!" protested George. "I'm from the future!"

"Then you're here to kill us all! Seize him!" shouted Harry; Ron and Hermione rushed forward to do Harry's bidding.

George backed away into a corner, pointing his wand at Ron and Hermione. "No! I must save Fred! He'll die if I don't!"

Fred and the other George laughed. "You think you can cheat fate?" laughed Fred. "You always did have a big head."

The other George seemed to have an inspiration. "Big head! That's it!" He pointed his wand at George, as did everyone, and George felt his head swelling. "Big head! Big head!" everyone chanted. George put his hands to his head, which was now the diameter of a human body, and bumped against the ceiling.

"His big head will save us!" cried George. Pointing his wand skyward, he shouted, "Onward! To battle!"

In an instant, they were in the midst of the battle; spells were flying, Neville was throwing dangerous plants at Death Eaters, and a dozen DA members were hiding behind George's head, firing spells. Return fire hit George's head; each blow was painful, and by the time the battle was over, his head was throbbing with pain. But the battle was won, at least temporarily.

He collapsed; Cho bent over him. "Oh, no! He's dying!"

"But it was for a good cause," said the other George, as Fred nodded. George faded out of consciousness...

...and was suddenly awake; the first thing he noticed was a pounding headache, worse than he'd ever had before. "Bloody hell," he muttered out loud.

He looked up, and found that the time was ten o'clock; there were many more people in the airport than there were the last time he'd been awake. Some people were now sitting near him, and while many seats were still available, he sensed that the time at which it was acceptable to lie down on seats had passed. He sat up, and immediately regretted having done it so fast, as his head pounded even harder.

Remembering that the earliest flight to England was at ten-thirty, he slowly stood, and walked toward a more central location at which he'd seen the day before there was a large board containing flight information. After a trip to the restroom, he found it after walking around for several minutes. There it was, sixth on the list: 10:30 a.m., London, British Airways. That's pretty soon, he thought; if I'm going to do it, I need to do it very soon. He read down the list, and saw 11:45, London, Qantas. Oh, maybe I'll take that one. Give time for the headache to go away, and also, that's the airline that never crashed. Be a bloody shame to die in a Muggle plane crash on the way back. I'll just sit here until eleven, then look into whether I need to get a ticket.

Sitting in the chair with his head in his hands, he lost track of time. He was yanked back to reality when he felt a hand on his arm; he moved his hands from his head and saw a girl standing in front of him. He guessed that she was no more than ten years old. She had sandy blonde hair and light brown eyes that were unusually large. There was something slightly odd about her face, but he couldn't put a finger on what it was.

Before he could say anything, she took a step toward him, and reached out to pull him into a hug. Baffled, he halfheartedly reciprocated, wondering if this was some peculiar Muggle custom. She held on tightly.

Over her shoulder, he looked around to see who she might belong to, as it couldn't be common for children to run around airports unaccompanied. Could it? A few seconds later, he saw a family approach: a man and a woman who appeared in their early fifties, a daughter who looked his age, and a son who looked sixteen or seventeen. Each was pulling a suitcase that had a handle and wheels.

He started to let go, feeling as if he'd done something wrong. "She just—"

"Oh, don't worry," said the man genially. "She does that sometimes. Sorry if she bothered you."

“No, I was just surprised—Hey!” he exclaimed as she reached into his jacket and pulled out his wand. He took it back, preparing to think of a cover story, but the man nodded in recognition.

“Don’t worry,” said the man, “I think that’s just her way of letting us know that you’re one of us,” he added, making a wand-swishing motion with his right hand.

“Ah, you’re wizards,” said George, dropping his voice. “Are you meeting someone here, or...”

“No, we were traveling. We went to Greece, India, and Indonesia,” the man explained. “We like to use standby transport.”

George shook his head. “Standby?”

“It’s our word for non-magical people,” he explained. “You have a different one? You’re... by your accent, I’d guess, British?”

“We say ‘Muggle,’” said George. “Yeah, I’m British. Name’s George Weasley,” he added, standing. The movement caused his head to throb again; he winced as he extended his hand to the man.

“Ah! What a coincidence,” said the man as he shook George’s hand. “That’s my name, too.”

“Your name is George Weasley?” George asked humorously, knowing what the man had meant.

The man laughed heartily, as did the whole family, except the little girl, whose expression was placid. “No, George Foster, actually. This is my wife, Nellie, and the children are Anne, Daniel, and you’ve already met Angel, in her own inimitable fashion.”

George shook everyone’s hand except the girl who’d already hugged him. “Angel?” he asked, surprised. “Is that a nickname? I mean, she kind of looks like one.”

“Everyone says that,” said Anne, an attractive woman whose hair was the same color as her youngest daughter’s. “No, it’s her real name. We actually had a name picked out for her before she was born, but when we saw her, we felt we had to change it. Angel just suited her perfectly, but back then, we couldn’t have guessed just how perfectly.”

George was about to ask ‘how so,’ but before he could, Angel pointed up at him. “Your head is bad!”

Strange thing to say, he thought. With mock indignation, he replied, “That may be, but it’s the only one I’ve got.”

The family again laughed. “I think,” said Foster, “she means that you have a headache, which I thought I noticed too. Is that right?”

George now allowed himself to rub his head. “Yes, it is. A pretty nasty one, actually.”

“Where you headed?” asked Daniel. “Or have you just arrived?”

“Headed out, back to England.”

“Bought your ticket yet?” asked the father.

“No, not yet. Was going to soon.” George hadn’t strictly planned on ‘buying’ his ticket, but there was no point getting into that.

“Well, in that case,” said Foster, “and not to be too forward, but I wonder if you’d come back to the house with us for a while. We don’t get a chance to talk to Brits very often, and you seem like a nice young man. Also, maybe we could help you get rid of that headache. You could catch a later flight.”

George paused; he had to admit to himself that it seemed like a reasonable idea. Even if he went to England immediately, there would be nothing he could do for a while, or at least, nothing that couldn’t wait for quite a while. It would be nice to get rid of the headache before leaving. And there was something compelling about

the young girl, who was looking at him wide-eyed, seemingly hoping for him to come. Why not, he thought.

“You sure? I mean, you just got back—“

“Oh, absolutely,” Nellie assured him. “The last flight wasn’t very long, so we’re fine. We’d be very pleased if you could come.”

“Well, then, it’s quite kind of you. Thank you.”

“Great,” said Foster, with a friendly pat on the back. “Well, we go this way, the exit for us is over there.” They all started walking.

George leaned down a little. “So, Angel, what do you like to do?”

She smiled at him, but said nothing. Anne answered, “Sorry, she’s... not much for conversation, in the usual sense. She speaks when she wants to, but usually only when she has something in particular to say. It’s just her way.”

“Ah,” said George. “But she’s not, I mean...”

“No, no, she’s fine,” said Anne. “You give her intelligence tests and she does above average, quite well. The way I usually put it is that she’s very selective about what she chooses to vocalize.”

“Oh, I see,” said George. “My mother would appreciate that. She always wanted me to be much more selective about what I chose to vocalize.”

Anne laughed, along with the others. “Let me guess, you were the class clown.”

“Guilty as charged,” George acknowledged. “I was popular among the other students, and I must have been quite popular among the teaching staff, which clearly desired my companionship judging by the many hours of detention I was assigned.”

“And what did you do after you got out of school?”

George had to stop himself from beginning the sentence, 'my brother and I.' "I opened a joke shop, which was doing rather well."

"Was?" repeated Daniel.

"Little problem with the government. Was taken over by evil wizards. Not so much into the jokes."

Foster nodded sympathetically. "Yes, I read about that."

George was surprised. "Really? It wasn't in our media at all. Of course, the media being controlled by the Dark wizards might have had something to do with that."

"I would think so," Foster agreed. "I should say, it wasn't in our media as a statement of fact, but rather as a foreign policy analysis based on actions taken by the new government. Did that affect your travel?"

"I suppose you could say that," said George, trying to decide how to present his travels if asked. "My family's had to go on the run. Too well known as opponents of Dark forces."

"Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that," said Nellie sadly. "That must be terrible."

"I try to read the foreign media when I get a chance," said Foster, pointing to a bank of elevators as their destination. "In the English media, one reads a lot about this Harry Potter fellow. Do you know him, by chance?"

Yes, drew blood from him just yesterday, George thought wryly. "Family friend, in fact. Younger brother's best mate. Always getting into trouble. Well, I get into trouble, by causing mischief. He gets into trouble by being heroic, thereby making enemies of Dark wizards."

"You look like you've gotten into a bit of that kind of trouble yourself, if you don't mind me saying," said Daniel, with a glance at George's head.

"Ah, the ear," nodded George. "Sometimes I forget. Yes, lost that to a Dark wizard. That was a close one, nasty business. But then again, my mate pointed out that it wasn't such a loss, since I never listen to anyone anyway."

Foster chuckled. "Over here, this elevator." He pushed a button, and the doors opened instantly.

"Don't Muggles ever use it?" asked George.

"When they look at it, they see a 'not in service' sign," explained Foster.

"Very clever," said George. It was a large elevator, so six people and five pieces of luggage had no problem fitting in. "What do you do, George, if I may ask?"

"Always a difficult question for me. The basic answer is that I'm independently wealthy."

"Oh, good for you. That's what I hope to be someday."

"But that hardly means he does nothing," added Nellie.

The elevator door opened, and George was astonished to suddenly find himself on an open-air arcade. "This can't be below the airport," he commented.

"No, it's several dozen miles away, actually," explained Foster. "The elevator is one of several in different Muggle locations, all of which arrive here. This place is the main, well, the only, assemblage of wizard-only shops. The arcade forms a large circle, surrounding this building." Foster pointed to a large, modern office building which was surrounded by well-kept grass, several trees, and well-designed landscaping.

"And this is surrounded by shops?" They started walking along the arcade, George trying to take it all in.

“Not only shops, but yes,” said Nellie. “There’s a library, a social center, an elder care facility, things like that mixed in with the shops.”

“And is there a wizarding neighborhood?”

“No, there isn’t,” said Foster. “We’re all spread out, all over the country. This is where we get together. There’s also a theater, a sports arena, that sort of thing. I know you have a few wizard neighborhoods in England, but the situation is different here.”

“Why is that?” asked George.

“Well, let’s head on home, and I’ll explain it there,” said Foster. He and his wife were headed for a door that was located in a wall between two of the shops on the arcade.

Foster pointed his wand at the door. “373,” he said, and opened the door; George could only see a white fog. “Where does it go?” asked George.

“Home,” replied Foster. “You have to take somebody’s hand, or else you can’t go through.” As he spoke, Angel took his right hand. “I see Angel’s got you. Follow her, then.”

The girl led him through the fog, and in less than a second he was in a smallish room that was clearly an entrance room; in front was a large living room. The last of the home’s inhabitants had come through, and the door closed behind them. Everyone left their suitcases near a wall; George imagined that Nellie would pick them up later and deal with them.

“The doors to homes all work this way,” Foster explained, motioning at the ordinary-looking door they’d just come through. “Only the home’s residents can just walk through. For anyone else to come through, they have to be touching a resident. So, if someone comes for a visit, they point the wand at their door, say ‘373,’ and knock; we hear it, and we answer. We open the door and see the person. If we want them to come in, we offer our hand, they take it, and walk through.”

“Very clever,” remarked George, impressed. “It’s a lot better than fireplaces. You see, in England—”

“Oh, we know about that,” said Foster, who gestured George into the well-lit, spacious living room. “Please, have a seat.” George sat on the sofa, Foster in a chair next to it. Daniel took a seat across from the sofa, and Angel sat on Daniel’s lap. Smiling, he put an arm around her stomach.

“We’ve seen magical customs, things like fireplaces, in a number of countries, and it’s endlessly fascinating how many different things have developed,” Foster went on. “England has some of the most unique ones, with the longest history.”

“I like this better, to be honest,” said George. “Makes more sense, seems more efficient. I mean, I grew up with fireplaces, but when I see this, I think, why don’t we do this? A lot of things would be easier.”

Foster nodded. “Anne actually wrote a long paper on this topic for her Magical History class. The gist of it is that while we may now know of things that are more efficient, countries like England with a long magical history have been doing some things in the same way for such a long time that it’s hard to change. Inertia is powerful; imagine what effort it would take to change the entire country from fireplaces to the kind of doors we have.”

“Probably couldn’t happen,” said George. “I suppose people would be too attached to fireplaces.”

“Yes, exactly,” said Anne, having come in from the kitchen. “Everyone would have to do it, or it wouldn’t work. Australia was the only country I could find that took such a utilitarian approach to magical transportation.”

“And you were able to do it because... you’re a young country?”

“Partly that,” said Foster. “But also because of the nature of the immigration from England to here. You see, while many Brits came here to build colonies a few hundred years ago, no wizards did,

because they weren't interested. England already had a tight wizarding community, and nobody in particular wanted to leave it. Now, contrarily, a number of wizards came to North America in the 1600s, because at that time there was a Darker government in power, and anti-Standy, excuse me, anti-Muggle prejudice was high. Many Muggle-born wizards chose to leave for the New World, where they could found a new wizard community, free of prejudice. Whereas, by the time of the emigration boom to Australia, the atmosphere in England was much more tolerant, and no one wished to leave. So, the wizarding population of Australia is entirely from what English would call Muggle-born, or their descendants. We don't have that many wizards; the latest census puts it at about 6,500."

"Wow," said George, impressed. "So, everyone must know each other."

"Not exactly, but it's not far from it," agreed Foster. "We don't have a wizard neighborhood, unlike most countries, because there's never been persecution of wizards here. No need for it."

"No Dark wizards?"

A disturbed look passed over Foster's face; George immediately regretted asking the question. "There've been a few. Nobody the Aurors couldn't handle, but it's a tragedy for all of us when it happens. It's always somebody from a family you know, or a family someone close to you knows. Sometimes you see it coming, but there's just nothing you can do about it. If somebody's got it in their mind to do something, they're going to do it."

It struck George that someone on the island might say the same about him, and he tried to push away the thought. "In England, we seem to have a whole segment of society that at least has the strong potential to become Dark wizards. Their... unifying theme, I guess, is anti-Muggle prejudice. Their families have been wizard-only for generations. Well, I mean, mine has too, but we don't take any special pride in it. We think it would be silly, like preferring white over black skin color, like that. But the Dark types, they get all high and mighty."

Nellie came in and sat next to her husband. "We were lucky to avoid that, not having that kind of history. But I'm not surprised they band around that. One thing about human history, both wizard and Muggle, is that if you find a group of people who've chosen the path of evil, there's bound to be a group that they feel they're better than. Sometimes it's just 'everyone but us,' but often it's one particular group."

"For Muggles, that group is usually the Jews," noted Daniel wryly. Seeing George's blank look, he explained some of the basics of Muggle world history involving Jews.

"Wow, that's terrible," said George. "I didn't know that. In our school, we only learn wizard history. Okay, well, in my case, pretend to learn. I was never good with the books."

Foster nodded. "It's interesting how many cultural differences there are between your country and ours, considering we share a similar heritage and language. Most of those differences, it appears, stem from the great age of your country and the young age of ours. In our school, we learn both Muggle and wizard history, maybe partly because we have so little of our own history here. You separate yourselves almost completely from the Muggle population, but we don't; many of us have friends in the non-magical community. So, it's important for us to learn their history, but not for you."

George shook his head, genuinely impressed. "Very interesting indeed; I had no idea. I can see why traveling is a good idea."

"Oh yes, we've learned a lot about quite a few cultures. For example, on this trip, in Indonesia, we talked to..."

Anne prepared lunch as they talked, and lunch was spent with the Fosters taking turns telling George stories of their most recent travels, and a few stories from older ones. Captivated, George just listened, his headache gone and forgotten.

* * * * *

It was decided that for the afternoon, Daniel and Anne would accompany George to 'town,' as the arcade area was generally known. George asked that if they ran into anyone they knew, they introduce him using an assumed name; he explained that he didn't want to take a chance on his whereabouts getting back to the Dark wizards in England. They agreed, without asking any questions, and Angel tagged along, not speaking for the entire time they were gone. She always held someone's hand, switching off between the three. While they walked, George talked about the shop and the products they sold, but always avoiding any mention of Fred.

Later in the afternoon, he was given a tour of the property the Fosters owned, which wasn't magically enhanced in any way. He was very surprised to learn that the Fosters had a car, which they used occasionally, though not often; it was necessary when dealing with Muggles.

Over dinner and afterwards, George talked about wizarding England, including the events of the past several years, especially involving Harry and Voldemort, and the events of the Umbridge year, including his and Fred's escapades; it was the first time he'd mentioned Fred to them, though he'd said he had five brothers. He was finishing telling the story, the one he'd heard secondhand from Ron, about Harry's actions on the day Dumbledore had died.

Foster shook his head sadly. "That boy's been through too much. For anyone, never mind his age. Daniel, he'd be about your age."

"I wouldn't want his life, that's for sure," said Daniel emphatically.

"So, Harry and the headmaster, Dumbledore, were close?" asked Anne.

"Yes, they were. I think Dumbledore felt guilty because he sent Harry to live with his relatives, who were not at all nice people." He described some of the conditions of Harry's early life, and their breaking Harry out of his relatives' home at the beginning of Harry's second year.

“Amazing, that they would treat him like that,” marveled Nellie. “What an awful thing.”

To George’s surprise, Angel spoke, for the first time in hours. With a distinctly mournful expression, she asked, “Was Harry sad about Fred?”

George answered reflexively. “Well, of course. When he spoke at the funeral, he talked about...” His brow furrowed as the realization struck. “Wait, how did—how did she know that? I didn’t—” George cut himself off, staring at Angel with shock, met by the same sad expression.

“George,” said Foster somberly, “Angel is... special. And not just because she’s different. She has... abilities; abilities that we imagine are based in magic, that we don’t truly understand. Sometimes she just knows things, things that seem impossible for her to know. The common factor is that they always have to do with emotions.”

“Do you mean, she’s an empath? I’ve heard of a few people like that, who could tell moods, like another sense.”

“Not like that, no, although she definitely has better-than-average abilities in that area as well. No, I mean, she knows things. Usually not details, but broad strokes. When we walked into the waiting area at the airport, she pointed at you—we were a few dozen meters away, we weren’t sure who exactly she was pointing at—and she said, ‘he lost half of him.’ Then she ran up to hug you. Half of the time, including this time, when she says something like that we don’t even know what it means. Just before, when you mentioned Fred, she must have gotten that impression again, the same one she got at the airport. She... intuited, for lack of a better word, that Fred was the one you lost. And the ‘half of him...’ I would guess that means that he was a twin. Is that right? George nodded, his expression somber.

“Fraternal or identical?”

“Identical.”

He saw a slight wince of sympathy from Foster. "I'm sorry, George. Was he like you, with the jokes?"

George nodded. "Joking was our standard method of communication. When I lost the ear, he was the first one to make a joke about it. Mum thought it was terrible, of course, but I wouldn't have had it any other way."

"Stiff upper lip," suggested Anne.

"I suppose," agreed George, "but also, just a sensibility that we shared, that there was almost nothing that couldn't be joked about. Except for his death, of course. And even then, the day after the funeral, he came back as a ghost. Very first thing he said to me was, 'filthy layabout, I knew you'd amount to nothing without me.'"

"If I may ask," began Foster cautiously, "very few people come back as ghosts here, and most that do have some problems. I don't know if it's the same in England—"

"Yes, it is. Your question is, why did he come back." Foster nodded. "There was a... battle, you could call it, with the Dark wizards. We promised each other that if one of us died, we'd come back. Honestly, I don't think either of us truly expected to have to honor that."

"Wow," said Daniel sorrowfully. "It sounds like he was your best friend, so you lost both that and a brother. It's hard to imagine. Is that what made you decide to travel?"

George thought about how to answer the question without mentioning time travel. "Yes and no. It had something to do with it, but only indirectly. It's kind of difficult to explain."

No one said anything for a moment; George broke the silence. "So, I guess Angel must be pretty famous among the people who know you."

Nellie smiled. "She's famous in almost the whole country. She's so unusual, and her abilities are so amazing, that many have heard of her. Our newspaper wrote about her once, relating a few of the

stories involving her abilities.” She went on to talk about that, and the conversation drifted away from anything to do with George.

Later, they invited him to stay the night, and he accepted, though insisting that he had to leave the next day. They put him in their guest room, he talked more with Daniel about spells, and finally went to sleep.

* * * * *

As he’d told them they could, Ron and Hermione entered Harry’s tent without knocking. He put down the book he’d been reading, and gestured them to the sofa. He’d quietly asked them at dinner to come by his tent in an hour or so. “Thanks for coming.”

“How are you doing?” asked Hermione.

He shrugged. “I find myself answering that question with the idea of—
“

“We’re still here,” suggested Ron.

“Exactly. It’s a weird thing, thinking that at any moment, your entire reality could vanish. A little unsettling. How’s everyone doing with it?”

Ron’s face suggested he wasn’t sure. “We might not be the first ones people would tell. There were a few nervous jokes, but we haven’t heard anything suggesting a lack of respect for what you did. Nobody’s second-guessing you, at least that we can hear. One person did say, ‘I hope Harry knows something we don’t,’ which I think is a pretty understandable sentiment.”

Harry nodded. “It definitely is. And I wish I did, but I’m not at all sure of that.”

“Did Kingsley talk to you? Devil’s Advocate?”

“Nope.”

“Wow,” exclaimed Ron. “I’m surprised he didn’t, but I guess he still might.”

“I don’t think he’s going to,” said Harry. “I think he knows that this is a gut call, and not the kind of thing you can rationally debate. Whatever he said, I would just say I thought it was the right thing to do, and he probably gets that. It’s funny; he gets on me for tiny, niggling things, but then I make this decision that has possibly enormous consequences, and he doesn’t say a word. I know why, but it’s still strange.” He paused. “Anyway, I must say, I’m a little impressed that there isn’t any more negative sentiment than that about what I did. It does suggest that they have a lot of regard for me.”

“Considering the risk, I’d say it means they have an extreme amount of regard for you,” said Ron. “I’m also a little surprised. Although, Mi—I mean, one person—“

“Nice save, Ron,” interjected Hermione with a wry smile.

“Well, give me a break, I’ll get used to it. Anyway, he said, ‘We’re going to be putting our lives in his hands, so we may as well get used to it.’ I thought that was a pretty good way of summing it up, actually.”

“No, you’re right, it’s entirely reasonable,” agreed Harry. “I can’t ask for much more than that. So, anything else from when I was gone that I should know about?”

Ron and Hermione paused, thinking. “Ron is a little more popular than I am,” she said, with a small grin at Ron, who rolled his eyes and explained what had happened. “I suppose,” he concluded, “that it was us because we’re closest to you, and they knew you’d have confidence in us.”

“Interesting,” said Harry. “You two have such different personality types, so it was kind of a clear choice. It seemed to work out okay.”

“I listened to her advice, so, yes,” said Ron humorously. “Other than that... oh, you’d better talk to Cho, she was taking an attitude about the cooking thing. She doesn’t want people to expect her to do it, and she didn’t do it the whole time you were gone.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to her. It would be nice if she could put a couple of hours into it most days, just to help Luna, but I’m not going to make her do anything she doesn’t want to. I did tell her that she’d be able to spend a lot of time studying and doing other Healer-related stuff, so we may have reached the limit of what she’s willing to do.”

“And also, there could be a thing with Cho and Luna,” added Hermione. “Cho was acting kind of disdainful, especially after the thing with the chickens. And Luna’s been... a little different all week, since then. More... spacey, like she used to be. More off in her own little world. You know what I mean.”

Harry nodded. “I noticed that, even today, just a little. I know, she was getting better about that, until now. Do you think it’s connected with Cho? Just how she responds to stress, maybe?”

Hermione shrugged. “Maybe. But I’m beginning to think it might be a good idea to put them into the quarters-sharing rotation. Luna’s never going to complain; people used to treat her a lot worse than anything Cho’s doing, and it never seemed to bother her—“

“Maybe that’s because she was in her own little world, as you said,” suggested Ron.

“Could be. Anyway, Harry, if I was Luna, I wouldn’t want to be in the same tent all the time with someone who had that attitude about me. If you ask her, she’ll say it’s fine, but I think you should consider rotating them without asking either one if they think it’s okay.”

“What would be my reason for doing that?” Harry asked humorously.

“Hmmm...” muttered Hermione as she thought.

Ron spoke up. “How about this: Luna and Cho were invited to vote, because they’re on the island, though not Aurors. In fact, even better: include Kingsley in the rotation as well. What happened made you realize that we are a group of Auror trainees, but also the group on the island, and it’s important for all of us to get to know each other for

the sake of getting along on the island, not just as Aurors.” He looked from Hermione to Harry, clearly wondering what they thought.

She looked impressed. “Not bad. I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

Harry hesitated. “I’m not happy about changing the rules in the middle of the game for them. I’d rather at least make it optional for them.”

Ron shook his head. “If you make it optional, Luna will say no, because saying yes makes it seem like she wants to get away from Cho. So, do this. Tell them you’re doing this—talk to each one privately—by the way, what will Kingsley say?”

“He won’t care. Or if he objects, it’ll be for a specific reason, not just preference.”

“Okay. Tell each one that you want to do it this way, explain the reason I said. Say they’ll be in rotation unless they specifically object. If they do, they won’t have to. Cho may object; she may not want to move around. But Luna won’t object. She’s cooperative, she’ll do what you tell her. So, she gets away, without having to explain to Cho why, since it was at your request.”

“Wow. I’ve got to say, Ron, I’m impressed,” said Harry. “Well thought out.”

“Didn’t think I had it in me, did you,” Ron teased him.

“I wouldn’t say that. Okay, I’ll talk to Kingsley first.”

To Harry’s mild surprise, Kingsley not only didn’t object, but thought it was a good idea from the point of view of group cohesiveness. He also approved of Harry’s adoption of Ron and Hermione’s suggestion that all trainees take turns assisting in food preparation.

Next, Harry summoned Luna to his tent. He decided to first ask some questions about what had happened in his absence. She tried to brush off the chicken incident with ‘you probably already heard about that,’ but he insisted on hearing her version. She related it diffidently,

more as if it had happened to another person and not her. Harry wasn't sure if this was her 'spaciness' coming back, or embarrassment at having reacted as she had; he decided not to push her regarding her feelings about it.

As expected, she had no objection to being included in the tent rotation, her only reaction being 'whatever you want, it's up to you,' and similarly had no strong reaction to getting help with the food preparation. He talked to her for a few more minutes about how she would work with those helping her, then thanked her, and she left.

Next, he went to Cho's tent—Luna hadn't yet returned—and asked her to come to his tent for a few words. They talked for a half an hour about a variety of topics including her living status (she didn't want to join the rotation), her view of the events in his absence, her feelings about food preparation ('happy to help occasionally, or teach'), her plans for her time (Healer study, careful observation of everyone's physical condition), and Harry's request for her to teach the trainees how to do first aid and other necessary medical knowledge ('just tell me when'). He found nothing to complain about in her attitude, or how she planned to spend her time. Toward him, she was her usual cheerful self, which Harry found a contrast to Ron and Hermione's account of a less-than-kind Cho who'd spent most of Harry's absence by herself. In addition, Harry wasn't sure—he didn't generally pay attention to this kind of thing—but he was fairly sure that the shirt Cho was wearing during their talk, a lighter and more summery one, was different than the one she'd worn throughout the day. But for one brief incident, it would have escaped his notice completely.

Reasonably sure he knew, but wanting to be certain, he walked over to Kingsley's tent after talking to Cho. He knocked and opened the door, standing not far from it to signal his intention not to stay for long.

"Yeah, Harry."

"Um... I don't know who else to ask this, so I'm asking you..."

"Okay."

“If a woman is talking to you, and she’s wearing a little bit of a low-cut shirt, and at some point she leans over—not to pick anything up, just no particular reason—and you can, you know, get a view... is it possible she really didn’t realize what she was doing?”

Without hesitation, Kingsley shook his head. “No. She knew.”

Harry nodded. “That’s what I thought. Okay, thanks.”

“Sure.”

* * * * *

Fred and George entered the Caves of Eternity, using their wands as flashlights. They’d gotten no more than ten yards before seeing a flickering translucent field in front of them, which obviously had to be traversed before they could proceed towards their objective.

“Over here,” said Fred, motioning George to the wall of the cave. On the wall was scrawled, ‘The first to touch, will die. The second, can pass.’

They exchanged a look. “Rather unfriendly of them, if you ask me,” said Fred.

“Quite so, old boy,” agreed George. “So, shall we?”

Fred motioned toward the field. “After you.”

George made the same motion. “Oh, no, you first.”

“I absolutely insist.”

“You may insist, but it’ll do you no good,” countered George. “You really must go first.”

“I couldn’t possibly be so rude,” said Fred, trying to sound gallant. “Please do me the honor of preceding me.”

“You deserve it more than I do.”

They paused, and it occurred to George that in characteristic fashion, they were using humor to put off the inevitable. “Well, something must be done.”

Fred nodded, seeming to reluctantly yield to this conclusion. “I suppose so. But what?”

Inspiration struck George. “I know! We’ll go through together.”

Fred grinned. “Capital idea, old man.”

They linked arms and walked toward the field, so that both would touch it at the same time. They were a second from touching it, and

George bolted awake to a sitting position, adrenaline coursing through him. He took a few deep breaths, then started to calm down. “Damn you, Harry,” he muttered. Never would’ve had that dream if not for him...

He couldn’t stop himself from wondering what he and Fred would have done if they’d been in that situation. The solution contained in the dream was nonsensical—better to turn back than have both die—but it had to mean something on a deeper level. Bugger deeper levels, George thought savagely. Not going to think like that. It’s just a stupid dream.

A look at a clock showed that it was seven-thirty a.m. May as well get up, he thought. He left the bedroom and came into the living room. “Hey, good morning,” said Daniel, reading a newspaper. It was tabloid-style like the Prophet, but looked only half as thick.

“Morning,” George returned the greeting. “Do you get that delivered?”

Daniel nodded. “Once a week, every Sunday morning.”

“Is it Sunday? I’d totally lost track of that. So, you have a daily paper and a weekly one?”

“Only a weekly. Like Dad said, there’s only six thousand-plus of us, so what news can there really be? Also, we hear half of it through the grapevine before it appears here anyway. We also get the Standy papers, there’s plenty of news in that.”

George looked over Daniel’s shoulder at the paper. “Funny, this seems really... I don’t know, dull, maybe. The Daily Prophet has a kind of more sensational style, like they’re really trying to catch the reader’s attention. This is more like... bureaucratic notification. Have you ever seen the Prophet?”

“No, I haven’t. Dad looks at it occasionally, as he said yesterday, but I think he’s unusual. Also, I’m kind of busier than he is. Sometimes, anyway.”

“You go to school?”

Daniel nodded. “We had a week off last week, so we traveled, which we often do when we have free time. I go back to school tomorrow.”

“Do you know what you want to do after you finish school?”

He shrugged. “Not really. No hurry to decide, of course. One feeling that runs strongly in this family is to follow your heart, your intuition. Don’t do something for the sake of doing it, but because it’s what you want to do.”

“So, you said your father is sometimes busy. How does that work, when he’s independently wealthy?” George sat in a chair opposite Daniel.

“Like he said, it’s difficult to explain. The easiest way to say it is that he helps people. He has a lot of friends, and if someone needs help, they know they can ask him. If he can help, he will. Sometimes it’s something small, sometimes big. When he’s not doing that, he learns things. He reads, travels, figures out how to do this or that. He always says, “You can—“

“You can never know too many things,” his father finished in unison with him as he entered the room. “Good morning Daniel, George. It’s good to know that I’ve instilled in my children a love of clichés.”

George and Daniel both laughed. “Of your clichés, anyway,” said Daniel.

Foster rubbed his son’s head lightly as he passed behind him. “Well, for me it’s true, anyway. But everybody’s different. For example, George, I was amazed last night by the variety, and mostly the sheer inventiveness, of the goods you sell in that shop. I’ve never been the creative type; I couldn’t begin to come up with anything like that. We all go where our heart takes us.”

“And Daniel says yours goes to helping people. Just curious, what was the last thing you did like that? Who did you help, and with what?”

As he sat, Foster took a few seconds to remember. “A friend of ours, man named Ryan Hannigan. He’s having a house built, and he wanted me to help him with the home magic, the routine spells you get built into a place. He wants to be able to turn it on and off, as he has Standy friends who might come over, and it wouldn’t do for a dish to leap up, sail over to the sink, and wash itself.”

Daniel grinned. “Standys would want to get that too.”

“Reckon they would,” his father agreed. “So, George, what can we show you today? There’s the Sydney Opera House, lots of visitors love to get a look at that, and—“

George waved him off. “It sounds great, but I really should be getting on. Not that I’m not tempted to impose on your hospitality, because you’re very hospitable indeed, but...”

Foster nodded. “Worried about your family?”

“Suppose you could say that,” George agreed.

“Well, can you at least stay until lunch? I’m sure there are flights in the afternoon.”

George felt inclined to agree, as he didn’t want to be rushing out; lunch sounded reasonable. “I don’t suppose there’s an easy way to find out when their flights go out.”

“Well, sure, we can give them a call,” said Foster. He stood and walked across the room to pick up a wireless telephone, and started pushing buttons.

George was familiar with the basic function of a phone, but it still seemed strange to see one in a wizarding house. On further reflection, another thing struck him as odd. Leaning over toward Daniel, lowering his voice so as not to distract Foster on the phone, he asked, “I’m wondering, your father walked over and picked up the phone. His wand is right next to the chair; he could have Summoned it. Why didn’t he?”

Daniel smiled. “House rules, which are rules because it’s what he and Mum want. Ever since we were small kids, the rule was, no Summoning. You want something, you stand up and get it. They thought it made you lazy.”

“I suppose I can’t say that’s totally wrong,” George allowed. “But then, what’s the point of being a wizard if you can’t use magic to make life more convenient?”

“We said that, many times,” agreed Daniel. “To no avail, of course.”

They chatted for a few minutes while Foster was on the phone. Hanging up, he looked at the note he’d written as he walked back to the chair. “British Airways is 11:20, 3:40, and 5:50. Qantas is 1:45 and 4:30. All to Heathrow.”

“Thanks, mate,” said George.

“No problem. Here, you keep this,” said Foster, handing George the note. George tentatively decided to stay for lunch, then catch the 1:45

flight. He ate a big breakfast with the family, and spent the morning talking about the differences in spells between the countries.

Lunch finished at 12:30, and George had decided he wanted to leave a little on the early side, no later than 1:00. He lingered and chatted after lunch, then went to the bathroom. He came back, and stood near the sofa. "Well, I'm sorry, folks, but I must be on my way. I really enjoyed my time here."

Foster stood. "As did we, of course. Okay, well, I'll go with you to the airport." He turned in the direction of the patio, and shouted. "Angel, honey, would you come in for a minute?" Daniel and Anne were already in the room, so George imagined that Foster wanted the whole family to say goodbye.

She ran into the room, looking at her father expectantly. "It's time to say goodbye to George, honey. He'll be—"

"NO!" she shrieked, racing toward George and, to his shock, hugging him and pushing him down to the sofa. "No, no, no," she repeated desperately, clinging to him.

Wide-eyed, George patted her on the back. "Angel, I'm sorry, but everyone has to go sometime—"

"George," said Foster gravely. "Please stay for a few minutes. This is very serious."

"It's okay, I'm not leaving yet," George assured a sobbing Angel. "Calm down." She stopped making noise, but still held onto him. To Foster, he asked, "How do you mean, it's serious? In what way?"

Foster took a deep breath; his wife sat next to him, an equally serious look on her face. "Angel very rarely has this strong a reaction, and there are things we can guess based on our experience with her. In this case, her reaction tells us that if you go back, there'll be a death. Maybe yours, maybe someone else's, we don't know."

"She can tell the future? Is that one of her—"

Foster cut him off with a gesture. "No, she can't. All she knows," he said, with a significant glance at George, "is what you know. Which means that you know, or believe, that your going back will or is likely to cause one or more deaths."

"More," whimpered Angel, in a high-pitched voice.

Indignant, George looked down at her. "Now, wait a minute. I don't know that."

"But you suspect it," suggested Nellie gently. "Or you think it's a strong possibility."

"George," said Foster, "We won't try to stop you from leaving. But I would recommend, very strongly recommend, that you put it off until we figure this out. I know you're a good person, and don't have any malicious intent. If you did, Angel would never have done what she did. She stays away from anyone with evil intent. So, this is worth taking seriously, believe me."

George put his head in his hands. I don't believe this, he thought. It's like fate is conspiring to keep me from doing this. He'd been able to brush off the concerns of those on the island, but these people didn't even know exactly what he intended to do. He found he couldn't in good conscience dismiss them. All right, he thought, let's do this thing.

He looked up, and found that Daniel and Anne were gone, while Angel was still at his side. Looking at Foster and his wife in turn, he asked, "Have you ever lost someone? I mean, not from old age, but someone who had many years left, someone you didn't expect to lose?"

Foster and his wife glanced at each other, their faces making clear that this was something they wished they hadn't been asked. "Lindy," murmured Angel, her head on George's shoulder.

"Our daughter, Linda," clarified Foster. George saw a faraway look in the man's eyes. "If she'd lived, she'd be 15."

"Last month," added Nellie.

Foster nodded. "October 9. Not a day goes by..."

Silence hung in the air. George waited to see if his host would resume the sentence. As he was about to say something, Angel did. "Uluru."

George looked down quizzically, then back at her parents. "Our daughter," said Foster heavily, "is telling us that we should tell you what happened. Not our favorite thing, but we've learned not to argue with her."

He sat up straighter, as if bracing himself, and began. "Uluru is one of Australia's most famous natural features, maybe the most famous. People from other countries know it as Ayers' Rock." Grasping from George's expression that he didn't know it, Foster went on. "It's either a very large rock, or a small hill made of rock, depending on how you want to look at it. It's very beautiful, and the colors it appears change based on the time of day.

"It was twelve years ago; Anne was eight, Daniel five, and Linda three. We took a family trip there. We spent some time on top of the rock, walking around, taking in the view. I was explaining to the children some of the history I'd read about it. Of course, we'd set up a magical barrier to prevent the children from wandering too far, far enough to fall over the edge.

"We spent more time up there than we'd thought, and the barrier spell wasn't as strong as we thought. Whatever the reason, at some point when we weren't looking, Linda ran toward the edge, the barrier wasn't there, and she fell off. It was about fifty feet to the ground." He paused again. "Her neck was broken; there was nothing we or anyone could do."

George's chest tightened; it had started midway through the story, as it became clear what the end would be. Not the same as my situation, but almost worse in some ways. "I'm sorry."

"Everyone was," agreed Foster. "Of course, it was crushing. Bad enough to lose a child, but to lose her because of negligence,

inattention, whatever you want to call it... at the time, we didn't see how we'd get through it. But you do, because... what other choice is there?"

The question, though rhetorical, seemed a perfect opportunity for George to ask his own. "I'm sorry, but let me ask... if, after it happened, some opportunity had come up for you to go back in time to prevent it from happening, would you have done it?"

Foster and Nellie exchanged a surprised glance; clearly, the notion had never occurred to either of them. "Do you mean," he asked, "we re-live the same event with foreknowledge, or go back in such a way that there are two of us at the same time, and intervene with our past selves to prevent it?"

"The second one."

Solemnly, he answered, "It depends on how long after it happened you mean. If it had been a few hours, or a day, I have little doubt that we'd have done it, and been grateful for the opportunity. Even the near-certain likelihood of a destructive time-paradox, I suspect, wouldn't have been enough to dissuade us. At that time, you may be able to imagine, we were in a very bad way.

"Now, if you put us a month or two after it happened... of course, we were far from recovered, but just beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I believe we would have enough perspective to understand that while it was very tempting, we would be putting others in danger, probably a large number of people. I'm pretty confident we wouldn't have done it. A year later, definitely not. While the pain was still there, and always will be, we accept that these things happen for a reason."

"It was so hard," added Nellie, "to work through the grief, the pain, and the guilt. It was something we had to fight every day, and then take care of the two children we still had. We're thankful that we had family and friends to help us. It was a very dark tunnel." She put her hand on her husband's knee; he put his hand on hers.

“Why are you so sure,” asked George, “that there would be a destructive time-paradox?” He felt for them, but he was tired of hearing that from people who couldn’t really know, or relying on legends.

“Well, at that time, I didn’t know for sure,” said Foster. “It just seemed like common sense. Two contradictory events can’t both happen, so something’s got to give. But since then, five years ago, I had an interesting conversation with an Indian man, a wizard who’s done research into the magical legends of this sort of thing, as well as study of quantum physics as it relates to magic. It would take a long time to explain, and I’m not even sure I could persuasively, but he made a very convincing case that while it wouldn’t destroy the world, it would—and has—caused a space-time disturbance with the paradox point, as he called it, at the epicenter, with the shock waves radiating outward. There’s plenty of historical evidence that this has happened, more than once.”

“I’m not aware that any way now exists to go back in time,” said Nellie. “George, are you thinking of going back, to prevent Fred’s death?”

Time to lay my cards on the table, thought George. “I am back in time,” he said, to his hosts’ shock. “Fred’s death occurred, will occur, in May of next year. I came back with a group of people for a different purpose, which would take a while to explain. My presence isn’t crucial for their purpose. As we speak now, Fred is alive and well. I would really like for that not to change.” George could hear the emotion in his own voice.

“George, believe me when I say that if there’s anyone who can understand how you feel, it’s us,” said Foster gently. “But believe me... if you got him back, it would be in a world that you wouldn’t want to live in. The results are unpredictable, but I am very sure they wouldn’t be good.”

“Would you tell us, George,” asked Nellie, “what happened, what happens, from now? I assume that last night, you stopped your story at this point in the timeline. Please tell us what happened after that, what led you to this point.”

George spent the next ten minutes telling them, getting as far as the night of Fred's death and Voldemort's defeat. George paused for over a minute, the reality of his plans starting to catch up with him. What if, he thought, I screw up what Fred died for, what Harry almost died for... Colin, Remus, Tonks... could I save them, or just make their deaths be for nothing?

Nellie spoke again. "I'm sure that people have told you that Fred's death was a heroic and worthwhile one, that he died helping to save your society. I'm also sure that that knowledge does you no good. Nothing can make you feel better about what happened. There are hundreds of ways to look at it, to try to make sense of it. Metaphysical, religious, philosophical, and so on... I've been through it all. But I wouldn't try to say it to you, because at this point it wouldn't do you any good."

He looked up at her. "What do you mean, 'at this point?'"

"I mean," she said earnestly, "that you haven't grieved yet." In response to his quizzical look, she continued, "What I say depends on a certain understanding of the word 'grieve.' Of course, you felt grief when he died, and you still do when you think about it, which I suspect is a lot.

"But when someone you loved dies far before their time, it takes a long time to truly grieve. We go through stages, and the mind doesn't easily let go of the person we loved. We want them to stay, and at first, the fact that they're gone doesn't dissuade us. We cling tenaciously to their memory, we feel that we betray them by truly accepting their death and saying goodbye. Day by terrible day, we must be beaten over the head with the reality of their passing until we begin to reluctantly loosen our grip. Only with time, agonizing time, do we reach acceptance. They're gone, and we must go on without them.

"There's a reason, George, that most people don't come back as ghosts. A few reasons. One is that it's not natural, and the ghost may feel depressed. But another is that it short-circuits the grieving process. You're only at the beginning of the process, and the ghost is there. You're happy, because they look and sound like the person you loved, and in an important way, they are. It's their spirit. You can

talk to them. But you can no longer grieve for them. You came back in time, for another reason, and now he isn't there, you can't talk to him. But you suddenly seem to have an option, one you didn't have before. One you didn't think of before going back, because there wasn't this pain of his absence, the pain that only grieving can begin to heal. It's a long and painful road, but we all have to go through it."

George looked down, emotion starting to rise up; Angel moved closer to him and tightened her hold on him a little. He knew, but couldn't bring himself to admit, that what she said was true. There must be another way, he thought desperately.

"George," she said, "if it could have been you instead of him, would you have had it be that way?"

He struggled to keep his emotions in check, as he could tell by her voice that she had considered the question many times, and that her answer was the same as his. "Yes," he managed to answer without breaking down.

"And having done so," she continued, compassionately but relentlessly, "would you have him take this kind of risk to get you back?"

The defenses his mind had built up against being dissuaded from his course of action lay in ruins, and he was finally forced to starkly confront himself in the mirror. He knew the answer to her question. The sobs started to come. Angel moved closer, wrapping both arms around him, holding him tightly. He put his arms around her, head on her shoulder, and wept as he never had before.

When he finally stopped, rubbed his eyes, and blew his nose, he looked down at Angel, still looking at him silently but compassionately. He shook his head in amazement. "Now, I really understand why you have that name." She smiled, but said nothing.

Turning to her parents, he said, "And I also understand that when Daniel said that you help people, this must be one of those things. Does she... find people for you to help?"

“You could say that,” agreed Foster. “It just sort of evolved. She started doing that when she was five years old. The first few times, we ignored it, told her to leave them alone. But fortunately, she kept doing it, and once it worked out in such a way that we understood that the person had a problem that we could help them with. We started paying attention more when she did that, and we soon worked it out. Now, we wouldn’t think of ignoring her.”

“The common factor,” added Nellie, “is that the person is a good person who is struggling with personal demons, you could say. The person often isn’t consciously aware of their problem, and is never aware that they themselves are blocking a resolution to the problem. The problem is always causing a great deal of emotional pain. We... do our best to provide an environment in which the person can come to terms with the problem, or at least, recognize it. It’s always a little different.”

“Bet you’ve never had one involving time travel before,” said George wryly.

“No, we haven’t,” agreed Foster. “Which was why we’ve never seen her panic like that, when you were about to leave. I suppose that deep down, you knew the danger, knew it was real—”

“But refused to admit it to myself, or brushed it aside with the notion that it wasn’t 100% certain. I think I used that as a way to give myself permission to do something I knew was wrong. It just seemed... so compelling to get him back. Like something I had to do...”

“Maybe you told yourself that it was dishonorable not to, and that only you could understand that,” suggested Foster.

George touched his finger to his nose, and pointed at Foster. “You’re sure you don’t read minds?”

With a small grin, Foster shook his head. “Just experience. Whenever anyone is contemplating something drastic, there’s always the fact that being a good person, one needs to justify one’s actions. We’ve seen people with such convoluted justifications that they make you look like an amateur.”

"I'll bet," agreed George. Glancing at Angel, he asked, "You don't have any idea why she's like this? Has she ever been looked at?"

"Once or twice, when she was younger," said Nellie. "It used to bother us that she talked so little. But she's always been happy and sweet-tempered, so it wasn't as though she was suffering. Some people are just different. Who knows what will happen in the future, but as long as she's happy, we're happy. As for her ability, we really do feel that it's a gift, a precious one. It's not as though she and we can help everyone in the world, but it enriches us to know that we can make such a difference."

George could easily imagine it. "Is there anything that bothers her? Besides guests who leave before they're supposed to?"

"Yes, actually," said Foster. "The first time we went to the top of a skyscraper with her—she was four—and looked out at the observation point, she screamed her head off; she was terrified. Another incident confirmed it; she's very afraid of heights."

George's eyebrows rose; it was an amazing coincidence. "That's got to make you wonder."

"Oh, yes," agreed Nellie. "It reinforced what we already felt about her, that she was the light at the end of that dark tunnel we went through. A year after Linda's death, George sold his business, and we decided to do what we could to help other people. It was our way of coping, I think. Trying to make up for a mistake that can never be made up for. When Angel's ability came along, we felt as though the universe, whatever you want to call the powers that be, was telling us that we were doing the right thing, by sending us someone who was extremely well suited to help us in what we'd chosen to do. We've been able to do a lot of good. I don't know if that balances any cosmic scales, but it has helped us learn that the ways of the universe are beyond us. Things happen, you deal with them as best you can, and you move on. If there's a reason for anything, it's to help us learn. And we can learn from anything; it's just a matter of whether we do or not."

“Wonder what I can learn,” George mused.

“From this, there are many, many possibilities,” said Foster. “We wouldn’t try to tell you what they might be, because you learn better when you work something out on your own. And we might be wrong anyway. Whatever you learn will probably pop into your mind when you’re thinking about something else.”

“Would you tell us, George,” asked Nellie, “why did you go back in time?”

“Why don’t you call Anne and Daniel back in, it’s an interesting story...”

George talked with the family for the rest of the afternoon and stayed for dinner, but declined their invitation to stay another night, this time because he knew that the others on the island had to be worried, “both about me, and them disappearing at any instant,” George joked. He shook hands and exchanged goodbyes with Daniel and Anne.

Nellie stepped forward and gave him a hug. “Feel free to come back, if you feel like a vacation,” she urged him.

“I will, but if it’s all right with you, what I’d also like to do is urge Harry to do that,” said George. “Not because he needs Angel’s help specifically—though with what he’s been through, who knows—but just for a place to get away from it all. He could do with a week of leisure.”

“Well, tell him he’s welcome, of course,” said Nellie. “Poor young man, I do feel sorry for him.”

“Most of us do,” replied George. “Except me, when I’m being a twit and making his life harder.”

She gave him a mildly reproving look. “We all have to go through what we have to go through. He’ll understand, if you explain it to him.”

“I hope so,” said George. He turned to Foster. “Thanks for everything. You do a lot of good. I’ll always appreciate it.”

Foster shook his hand and clasped his shoulder. "Good luck, George."

"You too, George," replied George humorously. He knelt, and was eye level with Angel. "And you... this face, I'm sure, I'll see in my dreams when I'm an old man. The world is full of the wonderful and mysterious, and you are living proof of that." He reached out; smiling, she moved closer and hugged him. "Thank you, Angel."

"Goodbye, George," she said. He stood and walked toward the door.

"You sure you'll be okay getting there?" asked Foster.

"I can get there from the airport, I looked at where I was. I should be fine. Goodbye, all." He pointed his wand at the door. "Rockingham!"

"Rockhampton," corrected Foster humorously.

George grinned, and so did they. "I will actually be all right, once I get there. Rockhampton!" He opened the door, and with a last glance at the family, walked through.

* * * * *

As he walked across the dark field, he couldn't help but wonder about what their reactions would be. He Disillusioned himself so they wouldn't see him from a distance if they happened to be looking in that direction, and reversed the spell when he was within ten meters. A few seconds later, Justin saw him.

"George!" he exclaimed. A dozen people were hanging around the table, though not Harry, Hermione, or Ron. A dozen heads whirled in his direction.

In view of what he had done, George had decided that his standard whimsical attitude would be put on hold for a while. "Hello, all. Would somebody use the whistle? I'd like everyone here."

Neville took out his wand and waved it, causing a sharp whistling sound lasting for a few seconds. Seconds later, people started coming out of tents. "George! Thank Merlin," Ron exclaimed.

"Hello, George," said Harry, his expression one of both relief and caution. "Glad to have you back."

"Glad to be back." George realized that Harry couldn't actually be happy or relieved until he knew that George wouldn't try such a thing again; he couldn't blame Harry.

"I have a few things to say, and it's not easy, so I wanted everyone here so I wouldn't have to say it twice," began George. "The most important thing is that I want to say to everyone that... I want to apologize for being an enormous ass, in pretty much every way possible. I caused you all kinds of difficulty, then all kinds of worry. I'd like to try to explain why, not so much in hope of forgiveness, but because you all deserve the best explanation that's in my power to provide."

He took a breath and paused, glancing around at the nineteen pairs of eyes on him. He knew it wouldn't be easy to say, but he also knew he had to do it. He continued, "Of course you all know that Fred's death hit me hard, much as I pretended otherwise. Then he came back as a ghost, as we had promised each other we would if the worst happened. It was great to have him back, even if only in that way.

"But then we came here, and something happened that I didn't expect. Suddenly, here I was, in 1997, when Fred died in May of 1998. He was, he is, alive, as we speak, and he's going to die in a little over half a year. I understand that, and will no longer try to stop it. But knowing that he was alive made me feel like I had to help him.

"I met a family in Australia, a very kind family, and they helped me understand a few things. The main one was that... I never really grieved for Fred, never really accepted his death, the pain of it, not deep down. He came back as a ghost, so I didn't have to. If I had truly accepted his death, then come here, I would have seen going back to save him as bringing the dead back to life. But not having

accepted his death, I saw going back to save him as preventing the death of a real, living person. I don't know if you can understand the way I saw that difference. It might seem semantic. But to me, it was all the difference in the world."

"I understand," said Hermione somberly. "I wouldn't mind going to Australia to fix the situation with my parents."

"Yeah," said George. "I can see that. So, I became..."

"Obsessed," suggested Lee.

"Yeah, that's it. Obsessed. Obsessed with saving him. Only I could understand why it had to be done, it was a moral imperative. No point trying to explain it to you lot. But what was I to do? I'd come here under certain understandings, and one of them was to not do things like what I tried to do.

"So, and I wasn't really conscious of this, but I started being a pest, started annoying everyone in sight. I couldn't be a part of the group, because that meant accepting the rules, and one of the rules was, no going off the island. If I could alienate everyone, I could blame them for alienating me, make you cast me out. I'd then be free of my moral obligation, and could feel free to go do what I needed to do.

"Now, one little flaw in my plan was that Harry, and you all, were extremely tolerant of my actions. Harry wouldn't push me out, much as I unconsciously wanted him to. Then Kingsley's little test gave me another chance. I didn't vote to choose a new leader because, of course, I had no intention of obeying whoever it was. It was Ron. Cool! He's easy to tick off. I was home free." Ron rolled his eyes, but clearly understood George's intent.

"Well, wrong again. To my great surprise, Ron was even more tolerant than Harry was. Which I'm sure wasn't easy."

"No, it wasn't," nodded Ron.

"I can imagine. And I want to say, Ron, that I'm very sorry for that. You didn't deserve that, to put it mildly." Ron's eyebrows rose slightly;

he nodded his acknowledgement. "I suppose, having lost Fred, there was a lot of sympathy working for me," went on George. "Then, finally having exhausted all your patience, I went to work on the chickens, which I'm not exactly proud of either. And Luna... I met someone in Australia who reminded me of you, in some ways. I think I can understand why you were so upset about that. So, I want to apologize to you specifically as well."

Luna nodded casually. "You don't have to apologize to me, George. But you might want to—"

"Apologize to the chickens, I know," he said as she nodded. "Don't worry, I will. Then, I spent a week in the slammer, courtesy of our clever friend the Minister. Harry came back, and..."

He looked at Harry. "I don't know why you let me go, mate," he said, then paused to control the emotion that was beginning to creep into his voice. "If you hadn't, it would've been a hellish year for me. I'll always be grateful for that. You showed a faith and confidence in me that I totally did not deserve."

"Clearly you did, since you're here," said Harry, obviously affected by George's words.

George slowly shook his head. "It was a near thing. I never did go back to England, but I was in a Muggle airport, a half-hour away from doing it. I don't even know for certain, now, that I wouldn't have done it. But without you, I'd never have had the chance to find out. So, thank you. And I also want to apologize to you, the biggest one. You've got ten million burdens, and I became the greatest of them all. I'll be a while making it up to you."

Harry nodded. "Just be the person you normally are. That'll be enough."

"Well, what I hope is to be someone who can be entrusted with responsibility, which is not exactly who I used to be. I can't pretend that Fred's death won't change me at all. I did, in a way, lose half of myself. I'm not sure I can be the same. The important thing is that I'll do my best to be a valuable part of what happens on this island,

contributing whatever I can. I want you all to know that who I was for the first few weeks on the island is not who I intend to be, and I hope you'll all give me the chance to prove myself again." He paused to think about whether there was anything else to say, then decided that was enough for the moment. "Anyway... thanks for listening."

He started to walk toward the tents, then stopped. "Which tent should I be in, anyway?"

"Number 5," answered Hermione. "With Luna."

"Luna? But I thought... never mind, I'll figure it out."

He took a few more steps as Angelina stood, walked briskly over to him, and hugged him. Emotion rose again as he returned her embrace. "Thank you," he whispered.

"I'm glad you're back," she whispered in return.

Lee stood up. "Hey, George, sit down. Tell us what happened. I want to hear about this family."

George hesitated. "I'm not sure everyone wants to hear the story..."

"If they don't, they can go to their tent," Lee persisted. "Come on, sit down."

George sat, and started talking. No one returned to their tent.

Three hours later, George entered tent number five. "Hello, George," said Luna, in her nightclothes.

"Hi, Luna. I'm not disturbing you, am I? Were you about to try to sleep?"

"No, I wasn't. Maybe in a half hour. So, I wanted to ask, you said someone you met there reminded you of me. Was it the older sister?"

George sat in a chair and shook his head. "No, it was Angel."

He wondered if she would be surprised, but by all appearances, she wasn't. "Is it because I don't talk that much? I mean, I don't think I talk that little."

He grinned. "No, it's not that. And it's not looks, or anything like that. It's a little difficult to put into words. The best way I can think of to say it is that I think if they had chickens, she would walk among them, and they would let her pick them up if she wanted to."

She nodded serenely. "Do you think it's so rare?"

"We had chickens at the Burrow, so yes, I think so. They never let me or Fred get to within five meters of them."

"Well, clearly, you had a reputation."

He grinned. "I suppose so."

They talked for another few minutes, said goodnight, and retired to their respective sides of the quarters. Luna curled up in bed, took her wand off the nightstand... and there were Snorkacks! She had seen them from the island once before, but this was a family! A baby Snorkack! So rare... She approached no closer, not wanting to risk the mother's wrath... looked intently for a few more seconds... and was back in her bed again. Oh, I have to try again, she told herself. A baby Snorkack!

* * * * *

Four tents away, Kingsley entered Harry's tent. "So, I imagine you're pretty relieved."

Sitting in a chair, Harry shrugged. "I guess so. But honestly, the thing I feel most is being happy that he's back, and happy that he worked it out. But yes, knowing that I'm not going to suddenly disappear is good, too."

"For me as well, I admit. I want to ask, had you figured that out? Did you have an idea why you thought he'd come back, or was it just faith?"

"I didn't realize he hadn't grieved, which now seems like the most important part of what he figured out. What I did realize, mostly from talking to Lee and Angelina, was that he saw it as a personal mission, and was probably deliberately pushing aside the idea of the consequences. I was trusting him to eventually realize that, and I figured that there's a big difference between what you intend to do when you can't actually do it, and what you'll do when you can actually do it. Given the actual possibility, I thought he'd come to his senses."

Kingsley nodded. "And how are you thinking about the possibility of him becoming an Auror in the future?"

Harry paused to think. "Haven't had much time to think about it, of course, but my basic reaction is... I believe he was serious about doing better on the island, and I'll be very surprised if he doesn't do what he said he'd do. Assuming that happens, I'm inclined to not think about it until the year is almost up, then see what both he and I think about it. I know he committed a huge breach of trust and rules, and you could say that should disqualify him from being an Auror right there. Still, I want to wait the year, and see how it goes."

"Makes sense. And... keeping in mind that you shouldn't judge a decision by its results, now that this is over, how would you evaluate the decision you made?"

"Hmmm... I suppose that if I don't judge by results, it's the same as before I made the decision. I would do it again, I think it was a... I was going to say 'good,' but I'm not sure you can say this was good or bad. I think it was the right thing to do."

"If it had been, say, Corner instead of George..."

"Interesting. I'm not sure; a lot would have depended on the exact circumstances. I know your point is that I have an emotional connection to George that I don't to Michael, and it's a good point. I know it's something I should keep in mind. But I just can't say."

“Okay. As for me, I don’t have any real comment; I just thought this was something that you should think about. One more thing... is there going to be any punishment for George? For doing what he did before he left?”

It had never occurred to Harry. “No. He was already in your tent for a week, which is a kind of punishment, but... he apologized, he knows what he did wrong, he explained it pretty well... I don’t see what the point of punishing him would be.”

“Some people would say it’s for the deterrent value,” suggested Kingsley. “When I was an Auror, people got punished for much less than that.”

Harry shrugged. “Probably because there wasn’t a Leader. The Auror Leader portraits actually talked to me about this. There were a few exceptions, but most of them aren’t big on punishment. Most of them said, you just let the person know that they’ve let you down, that they’ve lost your confidence. If they’re any kind of decent Auror, that’s enough for them to want to work to get it back. George clearly wants to get back not only my confidence, but everyone’s. In general, I don’t think I’ll be doing a lot of punishing.”

“I’m not surprised; I was just curious about how you felt about that. That’s the good thing about having a Leader; without one, there’s no one who can wield that kind of moral influence. Needless to say, most Aurors didn’t respect the Head of the Auror Office. Or the Minister, for that matter. Morally speaking, the main thing that people worried about was having the respect of their fellow Aurors, and some people cared about that more than others. So, the Head of the Auror Office sometimes resorted to punishment. In any case, of course, what you say makes a lot of sense. By the way, have you read ‘The Fifteen?’”

“No. I hadn’t even heard of the book before becoming Auror Leader, of course. Haven’t had time to read it, and since I can talk to the fifteen, there doesn’t seem to be much point. But I was thinking of reading it to them, see where they think it’s right or wrong. It’s, what, thirty or forty pages on each Auror Leader?”

“Yes. I looked at it again recently, but I’d read it long ago. I heard that Flourish is rushing out a new printing in response to sudden demand. I suspect that the portraits will say that it’s not very good, at best a sketch. Most of them presided over difficult and complex times, and how can you boil that down into forty pages? Most, I think all, have biographies devoted to them. Anyway, I have a copy if you’d like to read it.”

Harry shook his head. “Maybe in the future, but I’m mostly reading about spells, training-type stuff. Things I need to worry about right now. But thanks.”

“Sure. Well, that’s all for now, I guess,” said Kingsley as he stood. “With any luck, things’ll quiet down for a while.”

“That’s never really been my experience,” responded Harry wryly.

Kingsley gave him a small grin. “We can only hope. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Harry read for a while, then lay in bed and tried to sleep. His eyes open, he suddenly had a sensation that, for the fleetest of instants, his surroundings had changed. He did a double-take, and looked around, but could find nothing amiss. Must have imagined it, he thought. He closed his eyes and went to sleep, certain for the first time in three days that he would wake up in the morning.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 7, Out of Place: A new problem arises, bringing with it the now-familiar threat of destruction of the timeline, causing Harry to regret having taken the group into the past.

From Chapter 7: “What could have caused this?” asked Dean.

“Harry was warned,” said Hermione, “that disruptions to space/time could cause...”

“Weirdness,” suggested Ron.

Chapter 7

Out of Place

The next month flowed as smoothly as Harry had hoped events would when he decided to take the group to the island. True to his word, George worked hard, and any jokes he made were entirely humorous, none with a sharp edge to them. Everyone (including Harry) learned how to cook, and new friendships formed, as the tent-sharing situation encouraged those who lived together to get to know each other better.

It was mid-November, but the weather was still pleasant most of the time; people were joking that the island would spoil them for typical English weather. One Monday morning, everyone was sitting around the table waiting for breakfast, which was being prepared by Luna and Ernie. The conversation at the table turned to the topic of Dark wizards.

“So, Kingsley,” asked Corner, “what would you say is the toughest thing about catching, and dealing with, Dark wizards? And what, if any, is the difference between a ‘Dark wizard’ and just a normal wizard who went bad?”

“One question at a time, mate,” joked Justin.

“I think I can remember both of them,” grinned Kingsley. “And they’re good questions, actually—“

“Funny,” interrupted George, “I was just thinking those exact same questions!”

“It doesn’t surprise me at all,” said Kingsley, now deadpan. “To answer the second question first... not everyone agrees on the nomenclature—some Dark wizards deny that they are, and some claim the term who don’t really merit it—but we generally consider that someone is a Dark wizard if they’ve studied Dark magic, use Dark magic a fair bit, and adopt a frame of mind that we would normally consider ‘evil.’ It’s not really a black and white thing; there are plenty of shades of grey. As for normal wizards who go bad, we

could say they're potential Dark wizards. To really be a strong Dark wizard, they'd want to study it. You can do mental exercises to get you into the right frame of mind, and certain spells are conducive to that. So, it's at least partly a matter of your intentions. If you have a lot of anger and hate, and you let that dominate you, you're well on the way."

"If you only knew the power of the Dark side," breathed Dean, in his best humorous imitation of a villain. Harry and Justin laughed, but Hermione shrugged, evidently not knowing the reference. Justin took a few seconds to explain it to everyone.

"I saw those movies, actually," remarked Kingsley, surprising Harry. "It's not so strange that I would. I was undercover in the Muggle world, and in that situation, you should know the culture. I can even explain cricket."

"I never understood that," volunteered Harry.

"Don't worry about it," advised Kingsley. "But Dean, that's not too far from it, actually. Sometimes I wonder whether hidden wizards are contributing to Muggle culture, because various ideas mirror ours. Substitute 'magic' for 'the Force,' and you're not far from our culture."

"Actually," said Justin, "I watched those movies a few years ago, and I was wondering something about the line that Dean mentioned. It suggests that the Dark side, Dark magic, is more powerful than the 'regular' one, I guess, the good side. I've heard that mentioned in the magical world as well. Do you think there's any truth to that?"

Kingsley nodded. "I've heard that too, and here's how I would answer that: I'd say it's true to a certain extent in a self-evident way. It's like saying that the Reductor Curse is more powerful than other spells because it destroys things. Well, yes, of course; that's what it does. The question is, is destroying things what you want to do? So, we could say that it gives you great power, but not the kind of power that people like us would want.

"The other question is, would a Dark wizard's Reductor Curse be any more powerful than mine would be? We can't be certain, because

scientifically valid tests can't be done, but I'd bet large amounts of gold against it. It just makes no sense to me, and I have dueled more than my share of Dark wizards. Now, Voldemort was super-powerful, but he was like Dumbledore, a once-in-a-generation exceptional talent. That kind of talent can bring great temptation, if your life didn't go all that well."

"What was it," asked Justin, "that made Voldemort go one way, while Dumbledore went the other?"

Harry found himself answering before Kingsley had a chance. "A compulsion for control. Like Kingsley just said, his early life wasn't that good. I'd guess that when that happens, you want to control everything in your life, to stop things that you don't want to happen. Most people can't; it just so happened that Voldemort could, and he did. I think he just got used to the idea that he could, and should, control what he wanted to, and the notion of ethics never really stuck with him. Dumbledore had equal power, maybe more, but he rarely used it, because he knew he shouldn't control what wasn't rightfully his to control. I think this gets into what Kingsley's often saying about morality, which is the main thing that separates us from Dark wizards."

Kingsley looked very impressed. "Maybe the only thing. I'm surprised you know so much about Voldemort. Was it from Dumbledore?"

"Pretty much."

"Are you going to tell us about it sometime?" asked Seamus.

Harry nodded. "It's too long to tell now, but sure, sometime this weekend."

"Anyway, yes, Harry is very right," continued Kingsley. "And that kind of lust for control gives a wizard high motivation to work hard, to make the most of his ability. Most normal wizards don't do that, because it's not necessary. So, Dark wizards seem more powerful than they are. Not every Dark wizard, though, but definitely some."

"Now, I haven't forgotten the other part of Michael's question—"

“Funny, I already had,” put in Corner.

“About catching Dark wizards, what’s the hard thing about that. I’ve already talked about that a little, said that the important thing is psychology, knowing what the person might do, understanding him. That comes into play more often than dueling, subduing someone by force—“

“I kind of meant, the capturing by force thing,” clarified Corner.

“Okay. Well, the most important thing is of course the anti-Disapparation spells. Now, there are two ways to prevent someone from Disapparating. One, the jinx, is a spell aimed at a particular person, and if it hits them, they pretty well can’t get away. Only if the caster is a very weak wizard and the target is strong does the target have any chance to get away.

“The other type is a field, affecting a certain area. The good thing about this is that while the jinx can be blocked, the field can’t. The bad thing is that, naturally, the field isn’t as strong as the jinx, and the target can sometimes Disapparate away. The field reduces the chance that he can Disapparate at all, and increases the chance that if he does, he’ll get Splinched. So, you just make it riskier for the target to Disapparate.

“Now, Harry and I were planning to get into this later in the year, maybe a few months before we’re all the way back to when we left. I planned to say, and will say now and remind you again later, that I’ve used the field far more than the jinx. If it’s only one person, and you can hit him with a spell, why not Stun him instead of preventing Disapparation? Occasionally you might need him conscious for some reason, but still, you’re safer either Stunning him or putting up the field. He can run out of the field and then Disapparate, but we’ll be getting into issues like that later. But if you try to jinx him and he blocks it, then he can just Disapparate away. So, the field is your best bet. We’ll be practicing this, of course, when the time comes.”

“But you said there was a danger of Splinching,” pointed out Parvati. “Wouldn’t it be pretty bad if that happened here?”

“Not at all,” responded Kingsley. “Hestia and I know how to easily pull someone out of a Splinch; it’s something every Auror needs to know. We’re hoping it does happen during the training, so we can teach that as well.” Ernie and Luna brought large platters of food over; a large bowl of fruit was already on the table.

“So, as I was saying, capturing them isn’t really the hard part,” went on Kingsley. “The hard part is finding them. Most people go quietly when we find them, partly because—”

Harry was suddenly walking through a field in the countryside, Ron to his left and Hermione to his right. They all stopped, looked at each other in astonishment—

“—make it a criminal offense to resist being taken into custody—”

Kingsley stopped speaking as he swiftly noted strong reactions coming from most everyone at the table. “What the hell was that?” asked George.

“I was back at Hogwarts,” said Neville. “Binns’ class.”

Seamus nodded. “Me too.”

“I was at St. Mungo’s,” said Cho. “At least, I’m pretty sure I was.”

Harry stood. “Everyone who was suddenly somewhere else, raise your hand.” Almost everyone did so. “Everyone who wasn’t...” Only Kingsley and Hestia put their hands up.

“Oh, man,” said Ron fearfully. “This can’t be good.”

Hermione spoke up. “For us, this lasted only a second or two. How about everyone else?” Nods and affirmations confirmed that all had had the same experience. She turned to Harry. “Maybe we should find out where everyone was, what they were doing.”

Harry nodded. “Ron, Hermione, and I were walking together outside, I’m not sure where. Probably England, though. Everyone else?”

One by one, everyone said where they'd been. Padma and Terry had been in the same class, and Parvati had also been in History of Magic. Except for that, everyone had been in different locations.

Harry turned to Kingsley and Hestia. "And as far as you were concerned, we never left?"

"Nobody moved," affirmed Kingsley.

"I saw a few people look surprised," put in Hestia. "It was so fast, by the time most people reacted, they were gone."

"So," asked Corner, "did we change places with the versions of ourselves that are currently in England?"

"I hate to say it, but that's at least the obvious conclusion," said Harry. "Did anyone see anything that would disprove that idea? Like, you were someplace you're sure you've never been?"

Silence was his answer. "What could have caused this?" asked Dean.

"Harry was warned," said Hermione, "that disruptions to space/time could cause..."

"Weirdness," suggested Ron.

"Not how I would have said it, but yes," agreed Hermione. "Now, it's pretty clear that there hasn't been anything like that, with the exception of Fawkes taking Harry back to see Dumbledore. We assumed that it was okay because Fawkes did it, and this doesn't prove that wrong, but now we have to at least consider the idea that it could have something to do with it." She looked at Harry apologetically.

Harry tried to push down the sting of the notion that his decision could have caused a real problem, but he tried to push it down. I'm the Leader, he thought, I have to look at this analytically. "What's done is done, of course, but I can't say you're wrong. I still don't think it was

Fawkes, though.” Looking around the table, he saw doubt on the faces of some.

“I don’t like to ask this,” said Hermione nervously, “but it should be asked. George, can you imagine any possibility—“

“I’ve been thinking about it already,” he assured her. “I swear to Merlin that nothing happened there that had the remotest chance of causing something like this.”

“I didn’t think so,” she replied. “And you didn’t have to swear to Merlin, you know.”

“I was just emphasizing—“

Corner talked over George. “Unless someone who knew George was there went to England, and distributed information that could already have changed the timeline.”

“Records show that there was no travel between England and Australia during the time Voldemort was in charge,” pointed out Harry.

“No travel by wizarding means,” pointed out Corner. “But we all know about Muggle airplanes—“

“No way a wizard would’ve done that,” asserted Seamus.

“And no way would the Fosters have given anyone that information,” put in George firmly. “These were good, solid people, the kind who you know are going to do the right thing. I wouldn’t have told them the whole story if they weren’t. And they knew what was at stake, they knew very well not to say anything. And they were the only ones that knew I was there. It just makes no sense that it could have come from that.”

“Still,” said Corner, “like with Harry and Fawkes, we have to consider every possibility, no matter how remote. Sorry, George, I don’t mean to be a pain.”

George shrugged. "I'm not bothered. But there's just no way. I'm sure of it."

"There's another question we need to consider," said Hermione. "And that is, why is it that everyone was affected except for Kingsley and Hestia?"

"I was wondering about that," said Kingsley. "We have to look at the ways that Hestia and I are different from the rest of you. Let's see, there's our age... we've been Aurors..."

"Harry's officially an Auror," pointed out Ron, "even if the rest of us aren't."

"Good point," agreed Kingsley. "She and I are the only two who aren't DA members, or who didn't go to Hogwarts in the past two years."

"You were off the island for ten days... oh, wait, so was Harry," realized Neville.

"Yes, I already thought of that," said Kingsley. "Anything else?"

Nobody spoke for a few seconds. "You and she are the only ones who were Aurors before I became Leader," suggested Harry. "Or, let's say, our... counterparts... I mean, in November 1997, you're the only two from the island who were Aurors. If you see what I mean."

Kingsley gave him a quick grin. "The time thing makes it difficult, I agree. And everyone, let's eat our food while we think. No point letting it get cold." People started taking his advice as he continued. "You're right, Harry, and while it doesn't seem likely that it has to do with being Aurors, who knows, it could be anything. And we do need to think about it in terms of the time we're in, as well as the time we came from."

They considered the question while they ate, and after ten minutes, most of the food was eaten but they were no closer to an answer to the question. "Looks like the age difference and the fact that you've all been at Hogwarts lately are the leading contenders as

explanations of the fact that this happened to you and not Hestia and me. Of course, we can't conclude anything."

"And of course," added Terry, "it wouldn't do us much good if we did know."

"It couldn't hurt," said Hermione. "And the next question is, is it going to happen again?"

"One question has a lot to do with the other," suggested Kingsley. "I would think that that's quite unknowable at this point. But we do need to consider what to do if it happens again."

"Obviously," said Harry, "try to do nothing that has any possibility of changing the timeline as it happened. Or, you could say, do exactly the same thing you did before in that situation."

"There's not really enough time to do anything different," pointed out Padma.

"Unless the time we're there gets longer," said Hermione.

"There's a scary thought," said Ron. "Harry, Hermione... was one of us carrying the Horcrux? I didn't notice, if it was me."

The other two shook their heads. "It was such a short time," said Harry. "You're right, one of us must have had it. Unless it came here... no, but the clothes stayed with the people, so... what happens with that, anyway? Is it just that our consciousness makes the transition? Or just our bodies, but not our clothes? I mean, not that I know much about it, but I thought part of our memories were stored in our brains, and so to have the same memories, we would have to have the same bodies. Is that right? Hermione?"

She shrugged. "Much as it pains me to admit that I don't know everything, I don't know much more than you do about this. Anyone?"

After a brief silence, Hestia spoke. "I'm pretty sure what Harry said is right, though I'm not certain. Which means, for example, that when he was there... the Horcrux inside him was here, not there."

Harry's eyebrows rose at the thought. "Not that it matters, though. We have to make sure everything happens the same way. Even if... remember when I stupidly said 'Voldemort,' and it got us captured? What if we're there when that happens? I have to do it again, because if I don't, it could easily lead to a time paradox."

"But will we recognize that exact time, if it comes up again?" wondered Ron.

"This is giving me a headache," muttered Harry.

"Well, look, this probably isn't worth dwelling on too much right now, any more than we already have," suggested Kingsley. "When we get further information, we can change our plans. Right now, if it happens again, the important thing to prioritize is keeping the timeline the way it was."

They soon went out to do the day's practice, which went well, as usual. Harry didn't see any sign of progress on the group spell, but he wasn't discouraged; he knew it took the Japanese children two or three years to learn it, so he would be patient.

After dinner that evening, Ron made eye contact with Harry, letting him know that he wanted to talk privately. They went to Harry's tent, and sat on the sofa. "Pretty good today," said Harry.

"Yeah," agreed Ron. "Well, except for this morning."

"At least it hasn't happened again yet," said Harry. "That's something."

"That's certainly looking at it optimistically," said Ron. "Look, there's something I wanted to mention. If this continues, and we keep getting sent back there... it could happen that we're there during the Hogwarts battle, and... we could be there, George could be there—"

"At the moment Fred is supposed to die," Harry finished the sentence. "Oh, God, I hadn't thought of that."

Somberly, Ron said, "I'd bet a lot of Galleons that George has. I mean, if you got teleported back to a minute before Sirius died, could you just stand there and let it happen?"

"When I think about that," responded Harry, "I find I can't definitely say 'no,' which I know I should. I probably would let it happen, because I did pass the Auror Leader test, but I hate to think about it. And I hate to think about George being put in that position. So, let's hope to God that doesn't happen."

"That's for sure," agreed Ron. They were silent for a minute. With a small grin, Ron asked, "So, how about a game of chess?"

Harry grinned in return, pleased that Ron had asked; it was the first time since the earlier incident. "Sure."

Ron waved his wand, Summoning the set from his quarters. "You can teach me some of what that master taught you."

"It wasn't that he taught me, since he never said a word the whole time once we started playing. He said it was up to me to learn, by observing my own mistakes."

"Well, whatever," said Ron, plucking the set from midair and starting to set it up. "Whatever it is you learned, then. Let's put that time you spent to good use." Harry tapped Ron's right hand, which opened to reveal a black pawn. Ron pushed the queen's pawn forward two spaces.

* * * * *

A week later, it was Harry's second time to help Luna with breakfast. They set out together, first gathering the fruit. Harry started to summon a large bunch of ripe bananas, but Luna stopped him. "People are getting kind of tired of bananas," she advised him. "At first, I'd pull down a bunch of twenty, and they'd all get eaten. After a month, it was less than ten. So, I decided to stop doing bananas every day."

Harry nodded. "I hadn't noticed that."

"No, most people wouldn't," she agreed, looking off into the distance as she spoke. "I do, since I clean up after breakfast every day. I see what's left."

"But aren't there some people who would eat bananas every day if they were available?"

She nodded. "Kingsley, Michael, Terry, Hermione, and Lee will take a banana every day if they're there. Angelina, Ron, and Ginny never take them unless there's nothing else."

Harry found himself impressed with her memory on the subject. "Yes, Molly did tend to have bananas around a lot. I think I remember hearing that she and Arthur liked them, and always tried to get the kids to eat them because they're supposed to be good for you."

"Oh, she's right, of course."

"I suppose Ron and Ginny had a few too many. But if you don't want to take the whole bunch down, why not send up a Severing charm, and take down only what you want?"

"I don't think my aim is quite that good," she admitted. "Is yours?"

"I think so. One way to find out, anyway. How many do you want?"

She shrugged. "Anything between five and ten is okay."

The bunch Harry was aiming at was about twenty feet off the ground. "Let's try for seven." He aimed, shot off the spell, and watched part of the bunch cleanly separate from the others. He caught it was a Hover charm in mid-fall, then directed it with his wand into Luna's basket. She picked it up, and counted seven bananas.

She slowly nodded. "I may make you come out here every morning."

It's nice to be needed, thought Harry, but I'm not going to go quite that far. "There's no reason you couldn't do it, if you just work on your

aim, practice it a bit. I did a lot of aiming practice in Japan. I didn't use to be able to do that."

"Are you having the others work on their aim?"

"Not so specifically, but that wouldn't be a bad idea. I thought I'd just keep an eye on it when they practice."

They walked on, and came across several peach trees. "How are people on peaches?" asked Harry.

"If I just put them out there as whole peaches, almost nobody takes them. But I've found that if I take out the pit and cut them into quarters, people will take about two peaches' worth of quarters."

Good to know, thought Harry. Not exactly crucial information, but I guess if I was planning menus, I'd want to know what's popular.

Finishing up with the fruit and heading for the eggs, Harry wondered whether to broach with Luna something he'd earlier planned to: the fact that since he'd returned from being 'abducted' by Kingsley, he'd noticed that her behavior had been more 'spacey,' more distracted, than it had before. He'd hesitated to do so, because it wasn't to a great degree, and he didn't want to be seen as criticizing her.

But now he decided not to, mostly because even though she acted distracted at times, if she knew exactly who ate bananas and who didn't, it meant that her mind wasn't too far away. He decided to settle for a more general question. "Are you doing okay these days?"

Appearing only mildly surprised at the question, she answered, "Sure. Why do you ask?"

"It's just something I want to ask everyone from time to time," he improvised. "I'm responsible for everyone being here, and there could be things about living on the island that people might think wasn't worth mentioning, but could cause problems in the long run. So, I'm just wondering."

"No, everything is fine," she said casually. "I like being here; it's very relaxing. It's an opportunity that'll probably never come again, to spend time in this kind of environment, far from everyday life in the normal world. It's very beautiful here."

"And how are you doing with the tent-switching?"

"That's good, too. It helps you get to know people, so I like it."

"I wonder why Cho didn't want to do it."

Luna shrugged. "Everyone's different."

They came into view of the chickens, and

Harry was suddenly in a forest, alone. He looked around, but could see no one anywhere near him. He was wearing a fairly heavy jacket with a hood; he noticed that it was raining, and somewhat cold, much colder than it was on the island, but not atypical for a November day in England.

He was about to call out, then realized that it was a bad idea. He had no idea where he was, or how near he was to possibly being seen. He assumed that Ron and Hermione were, as he probably was, scouting the area; during the year they'd spent seeking the Horcruxes, they had split up occasionally. He wanted to find Ron and Hermione, but he realized he'd probably make things worse by looking for them. He stood still, determined not to move until he was back where he should be.

It was starting to dawn on him that this was taking a lot longer than it had last time, when

He was suddenly standing with Luna again. They exchanged a glance. "Hogwarts?" he asked her; she nodded. Without asking, he took her arm and Disapparated them both.

They appeared next to the table. Almost a dozen people were sitting there, and the rest were now leaving their tents. Waiting for Harry, nobody spoke.

“That was a lot longer than it was last time, maybe about ten seconds,” said Harry. “Did everyone have the same feeling?” Nods confirmed his assessment. “Ron, Hermione, you were in a forest, alone?” They also nodded. “Was anyone somewhere they were surprised to find themselves?”

Dean and Justin immediately raised their hands. “I was outside a house I’ve never seen before,” said Dean. “I have no idea where it was. I just stood there, waiting for it to be over.”

“I was in the bedroom of my home,” said Justin, “which of course isn’t strange. But my shoulder bag was on the bed, and it had a fair amount of stuff in it, which didn’t happen before. It was as if I was going to take some kind of trip.” Harry winced at the now-certain knowledge that, in however small a way, the past had been changed.

“This is really not good,” said Ron with deliberate understatement.

“No, it’s getting serious now,” agreed Harry. “Nobody else was in a situation they don’t remember?”

No one else answered. “Seems not,” said Kingsley. “I was out here with some of you, and again it didn’t affect me or Hestia. Lee and Zacharias were asking rather loudly what was going on, and the others were confused, looking around. Padma asked Parvati if she knew what was happening; she said no. Padma asked me who I was. I told her my name and that I was an Auror. I wasn’t planning on telling her much more than that, but she didn’t have a chance to ask me any more questions.”

Okay, thought Harry, time to analyze this. “Kingsley, your opinion, how bad is this?”

“As Ron said, it’s pretty bad, and it has the potential to get quite a lot worse. Two events don’t make a pattern, but the time was longer for this one, which doesn’t bode well. If the times continue to get longer, it’ll become more and more difficult—maybe impossible—to ensure that the timeline doesn’t change. From what Justin said, it has already; the question is, will it change in a way from which recovery of

our own timeline is impossible. As time goes by, the answer to that question will become clearer.

“We also have to make a decision about what to tell your counterparts the next time they show up. They’re going to want answers—from their point of view, it might seem like they’ve been kidnapped—but I’d really rather not tell them that Voldemort is defeated, and Harry is leading a bunch of prospective Aurors on an island for training purposes.”

“You could lie, say the same thing happened to you too,” suggested Justin.

“Worth considering, but I’d rather not lie if I don’t have to. Generally good policy, since backing up the lie can eventually put you in an untenable position. I’ll spend some time today thinking of what to tell them if it happens again. The harder job is the one you guys will have. You could find yourselves in a position in which you have no idea what’s going on, maybe you’re with someone, and/or expected to do something, but you don’t know what.

“As for what to tell them, it depends on who it is, whether you can trust them. Or, maybe your counterpart has already told them they were suddenly on an island, in which case the person will know when you seem out of place, not knowing what’s going on. If you’re lucky, you’ll be alone, or in a situation like a Hogwarts class where no attention will be drawn to you. Everyone will have to make his own decision about what to do, in the situation.”

Harry mentally cursed himself; going back in time was his decision, and whether by his actions or not, he was responsible for whatever damage would be done to the timeline. The fact that the portraits had foreseen no unusual danger in the enterprise didn’t mitigate his feelings of responsibility. Again, he knew he couldn’t linger on the idea, especially now. He had to think clearly.

“Okay,” he said, “everyone has to try to remember what they were doing at about this time. For those who were at Hogwarts, it shouldn’t be too hard, but everyone has to know what they’re supposed to be doing at any given point, as well as possible.”

Lee spoke up. "Um... not to be too gloomy, but isn't the timeline pretty well screwed up at this point? I mean, the first one, it was just a second, it didn't have to affect anything. But this one was so long it was impossible to ignore, and as Kingsley mentioned, those people may start talking about it. But we were those people, and I certainly don't have any memory of suddenly being on an island. So it seems to me that the temporal paradox has already occurred."

"There could be a tipping point," suggested Terry.

"I was thinking that," agreed Hermione. "There is a difference, but maybe not such a substantial one that it has to affect anything. To take an extreme case, let's say the next time we go, we find that one of our counterparts has died. I think we could all agree that that would cause a catastrophic time paradox, since if we died in the past—for us, that is—then we wouldn't be here now. But if nothing different beyond a certain point—the tipping point, as Terry said—happens, it may be that nothing has to change. So, we need to work to keep the damage to a minimum."

Harry again asked everyone to run down what they'd been doing when taken back, and winced slightly when George said that he'd been talking to Fred. He wondered whether he should have a private chat with George to see how he was doing with such a difficult situation, but decided not to; he had to trust that George would do the best he could.

After there was nothing more to discuss, Harry went back out with Luna to finish gathering the food for the now-delayed breakfast. As they walked toward the chickens, Harry muttered, "I can't believe this is happening."

"It'll be okay," said Luna serenely.

Harry glanced at her, surprised that even she could take such a blasé attitude. "Do you really think so?"

She shrugged. "What will be, will be."

Hard to argue with that, he thought. But the thing that worries me isn't whether what will be, will be; it's whether what was, will be.

* * * * *

The next few days passed slowly and uneasily; the mood of the group was one of waiting for the other shoe to drop. People talked about it occasionally, but no one brought up the topic of what had caused this predicament. Harry believed that it was neither Fawkes nor George; it had to be something else.

Harry decided to have everyone practice the group spell before the day's main training started. They spent fifteen minutes, and nothing changed, to Harry's lack of surprise. After Harry called a halt, Padma asked, "Do you really think this is going to work?"

Mildly annoyed at her attitude, he was about to respond when Ron did. "I don't think he'd be having us spend all this time on it if—"

"I wasn't complaining," she said defensively. "It just, I don't know, seems like we're getting nowhere with this."

Harry wondered if this was the kind of situation in which he was supposed to keep their spirits up. "I know I've already told you this, but I felt like I was getting nowhere with this after a few months in Japan, right up to the point where I suddenly got it. It'll come when it comes, and I certainly hope that everyone's giving it their best shot mentally."

"I am," she said. "I suppose it's easy to get discouraged. But I just had a thought. Maybe, as a separate exercise, you, Hermione, and Ron ought to try to do this spell yourselves, as a three-person thing."

Harry was surprised to hear it suggested by one of the group; he'd had the thought, but decided not to pursue it because it could seem as though the three of them were shutting the rest out, or being isolated from them.

"Why?" asked Ron.

“Because Harry’s said this spell needs a group feeling, and there was no closer group at Hogwarts than you three. You’ve got lots of experiences and feelings to work with. I really think you ought to give it a try, on a regular basis. If this is going to work, it might work with you three first, and that would give us added confidence that it could work with us eventually.”

Scanning the others while she talked, Harry could see no opposition to the idea. “Okay, then. We’ll just take a few minutes to get started on it now. You guys take a break.”

Harry led Ron and Hermione to a spot about fifteen feet away from the others, in the middle of the field. “Okay, you know what to do,” he said. “Think about all the stuff we did together, remember the feeling we’ve always had. Let that be going through your mind when we do the spell.

“Oh, and just for the heck of it, imagine that when you shoot, your spell is more in the shape of a corkscrew. It travels slower, but will fall in with the others. See the spell like that when it leaves your wand.”

“Can I take a minute to get in that frame of mind?” asked Hermione.

“Good idea, let’s all do that. Hold up your wand when you’re ready.”

A minute later, Hermione held up her wand, followed by Harry, and finally Ron. They fired the spells, and Harry was surprised to see all three spells shaped like corkscrews, moving relatively slowly. He was then at once very surprised, and not surprised at all, to see them fall in together and become one. An enormous, bright burst of light exploded and faded in front of them.

They turned to face each other. Impressed and pleased, they shared a smile. “Merlin’s beard,” they heard Zacharias exclaim, as further amazed commentary came from the group.

“Thanks, Padma, that was a good idea,” grinned Ron when they’d reached the main group again.

"I didn't think you'd get it quite that fast," she admitted. "What did you do?"

Harry shrugged. "Same thing I'm always telling you to do."

"Let's try it again, another fifteen minutes," she said, now animated.

Smiling, Harry responded, "No, I'd rather do it the same way, in the same pattern. Slow and steady. It'll happen when it happens."

"The three of us are going to have to do some practice with this, with different spells," suggested Ron, who was clearly pleased. "We should know how they work like that, and what we're able to do."

"Good idea," agreed Harry. "Okay, let's assemble. We're going to work more on dueling."

"Where are Kingsley and Hestia?" asked Parvati.

"I'll call them when we need them, but first I want to do some review stuff, so I didn't want to bother them. Okay, now

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were back in the English countryside, standing in a semicircle. They exchanged unhappy glances. "Damn," muttered Harry.

"Look!" whispered Ron.

Harry turned and saw, ten yards away, two figures who couldn't be identified; both were wearing dark cloaks with hoods—one grey, the other black—and their faces were away from Harry and the others. Their faces were near each other, so it seemed as though they were talking.

"Who are they?" asked Ron. "What are they doing? This definitely never happened!"

Harry knew what he had to do. "Be absolutely quiet until I tell you otherwise," he instructed, emphasizing the order's importance with

his eyes. He closed his eyes and concentrated. After a few seconds, even though they were whispering, he could hear.

“...barely trust me as it is. Even if I trust you, how do you expect me to be able to get them to trust you?” To his surprise, Harry recognized the whispered voice as that of Draco Malfoy.

The other speaker, he quickly realized, was Victor Crabbe. “Tell them I’m scared of the Dark Lord,” he replied urgently. “Because it’s true.” Using his lie-detection sense, Harry understood that the statement was true. Well, obviously, he thought.

“Of course, we all are,” responded Malfoy doubtfully. “That doesn’t prove anything. If you’re scared of him, you’re going to want to be even more obedient, not go behind his back and try to join someone who’s betrayed him. If he finds out you’ve done this, he’ll kill you.”

“All the more reason to let me join you! Draco, we’ve been together for years, since we were this high! You can trust me.”

Harry felt a mild panic as his senses told him that Crabbe was lying. Worse, he had no way of knowing how long their conversation would take, and he could be whisked away at any time, unable to pass this information along to anyone. He considered interrupting their conversation, but he had no way of knowing how it would affect the situation; it would be very risky.

“I’m not saying I don’t trust you,” said Malfoy. “I’m saying that they’re not going to, and I need them if I’m going to avenge myself on—”

“Don’t say that! It’s bad luck.”

“I’ve already betrayed him, my luck’s not going to get any worse. If you’re that scared, then maybe you shouldn’t come. Go hide, live off the land, stay out of trouble—”

“Just talk to them! If they’ll trust you, they’ll trust me.”

As they spoke, Harry quickly conjured a pen and paper, and wrote, “Crabbe is lying. Trust me, I know. HP2.” Folding it quickly, he wrote

Malfoy's name on the outside and dropped it on the ground, to be found by their counterparts on their return. He'd wanted to write more, but if he were whisked back before he finished, the message couldn't be delivered.

"Okay, I'll talk to them. Meet me back here tomorrow, at this

He was suddenly standing with the trainees in the field, but their location was different; they had moved much closer to the table, and a few people were near the tents. Harry waved his wand, making the loud whistling noise.

"You could have just called us," said Kingsley humorously as he exited his tent. Seeing the people standing around and Harry's stern expression, Kingsley changed his attitude. "It happened again."

"Yes," said Harry. "Let's all have a seat. This one was much longer, maybe a minute and a half or so."

Harry got the stories from the others, keeping his for last. He told them that he'd overheard Malfoy and Crabbe, but not the specifics of how far away they were.

"So," he concluded, looking at Kingsley, "this is very significant, and I have to say that if we caused this, it's hard to say how. We don't know in what way Malfoy 'betrayed' Voldemort; it could be yesterday, for all we know. I suppose you could say that word got out from one of our counterparts about this change, and it somehow weirdly affected what Malfoy did. It seems really unlikely, but I'm not sure what the alternatives are, either."

"There's one," said Ernie, "that you've already discounted, but it would make more sense—"

"Dumbledore," cut in Harry, trying to control his annoyance. There's just no way he did anything different, he thought.

Ernie seemed to sense Harry's feelings. "He might have even done something unconsciously different, his fear of death—knowing he was going to die—might have made him more persuasive with Malfoy.

Malfoy decides not to kill him, which a Death Eater sees. Malfoy's busted, there's no going back. So, he switches sides. Joins up with you, because you're the best hope of defeating Voldemort, and because you saw what happened, he knows you'll believe him. You, your counterpart, agrees to work with him because he may know things you need to know."

There was silence for a few seconds. "It makes sense," agreed Kingsley, with a look at Harry that communicated that Harry should at least consider the idea that Ernie could be right.

Again, Harry struggled to be dispassionate, which he was learning was difficult when his pride or reputation was at stake. "Yes, I see that. But the problem is that I have memories that contradict this. I don't remember anything different on the day of Dumbledore's death—"

"You don't think you do," suggested Neville. "But what if your memories, any of us, have been changed due to what happened? We wouldn't know."

"But then I would remember Malfoy running around with us, which I don't."

"We don't know the speed with which the new memories would integrate," said Hestia. "It's a stretch, I agree. But this is such a rare phenomenon, we can't know how it'll work. Ernie's notion is worth serious consideration, potential holes or not."

"Okay," said Harry. "Well, I wish we'd brought a copy of the book that the three of us wrote, because we could compare it against—"

"Oh, we did," said Hermione happily. "I did, anyway. I threw it into the set of books I brought, in case anyone wanted to read it."

"Thank God. And thank you, Hermione," he added humorously. "And—"

"Would the book change?" wondered Ernie.

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's a fair question," pointed out Terry, noticing.

"That wasn't at you, Ernie," Harry said. "This whole thing just gives me a headache, wondering about stuff like that. Hermione? Would it change?"

"It might," she admitted. "Again, we can't know. That would be a theory, which we can't estimate the likelihood of. The idea is that every time something changes, not only do our memories adjust, but the whole timeline adjusts. Even if we wrote down right now which things contradict what we know, we can't be certain that that wouldn't change as well. Now, I disagree with Hestia that there could be some lag; to me, it makes logical sense that the timeline would adjust instantly, and there would be no delay. I can't think of any reason that there'd be some delay; there's nothing even theoretical that's consistent with that." Terry nodded his agreement; nobody else ventured an opinion.

"So," she continued, "Harry's point that we now remember contradictory things holds more water with me, and strongly suggests that the timeline isn't adjusting, and nothing has changed with us even if it has in the past. Which, I must say, isn't the best thing in the world either."

Terry nodded. "You mean, because the alternatives are either fluid adjustment or a catastrophic time paradox."

"Yes. We don't know what the threshold would be for that. Somebody dying who we know didn't die? Anything happening that would cause the situation as we know it now to become impossible? That's becoming more likely."

"I'd like everyone to write down the known contradictions, in any case," said Harry. "There's nothing we can do about the idea of the timeline adjusting, so it seems like we shouldn't worry about that. If it does, it does."

"Now, today was proof of the idea that these things are getting longer and longer, and that's likely to continue. Unless we can figure out a way to stop it—and I can't begin to imagine what that would be—

sticking our heads in the sand and hoping to end up back here soon won't be an option. We're going to have to start being active participants over there, and we have to find out what's going on there, not just assume we know."

"Hestia and I are going to have to start talking to them," said Kingsley. "We didn't know it happened this time, but we'll have to tell them next time that we don't move, and ask them for information about what's going on over there."

"They may not want to give it," said Neville. "They may think it's some sort of Dark scheme."

"True. I'll do my best to be persuasive. If we can get them to update us every time, then you'll only be one switch behind, as it were. It'd help a lot. And Harry, you can help me persuade them."

"How am I going to do that? I'll be over there."

Kingsley gave him a small grin. "As the Muggles say, I'd like you to leave them a message."

* * * * *

Three days later, Harry was watching a few practice duels between Ron and Neville when it happened again. "Well, here we are again," said Harry.

"How long for this time?" wondered Ron aloud.

Kingsley, who was off to the side, walked over, Hestia behind him. "Everyone, my name is Kingsley Shacklebolt. Harry and the Weasleys know me, but the rest of you don't. This is Hestia Jones, also an Auror. She and I are on this island with your counterparts, but for some reason we don't understand, what's happening to them, and you, isn't happening to us."

"How do we know they aren't doing this?" asked Zacharias loudly.

"He's on our side," responded Harry, at equal volume.

“Are you sure of that?” pressed Zacharias.

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Harry. “So, Kingsley, do you have any idea what’s causing this?”

“No, we don’t know. What we think—well, first, I should explain that we’re from the future, at least, what would be the future to you. In early October 1998 we came to this island and went back in time one year, for training purposes. This is a kind of... elite group, for lack of a better phrase, based on membership in Dumbledore’s Army. Not everyone was chosen or came, as you can see.

“Now, I know you want to know more, and I don’t blame you. But the problem is that we’re very worried about danger to the timeline, and if we tell you what happens in the future, it could utterly change, from top to bottom, which would cause—“

“A terrible time paradox,” said Hermione, looking aghast. “Why in the world did you come back in time? It just seems... totally irresponsible! I can’t believe I agreed to this!”

“Well, you did,” Kingsley assured her. “Obviously. As for why, I’m afraid that’s one of the things I shouldn’t tell you—“

“That’s pretty convenient,” said Zacharias.

“It’s also true,” countered Kingsley, trying to hide his annoyance. “And we probably shouldn’t spend much of our time right now debating it. Harry, there’s something your counterpart wanted you to see.”

Harry took his hand out of the Pensieve. “So,” asked Kingsley, “are those your memories as well?”

“Most of them,” said Harry. “The only one that’s different is the last one, the one with Dumbledore. That’s not the way it happened, for me.”

“Until that point,” pressed Kingsley, “was what happened pretty much the same, or exactly the same?”

Harry thought for a few seconds. "To the best of my ability to tell, exactly the same."

"Including the events of that day? Going out for that Horcrux, and finding the note? It would be important to know exactly what was the first event in this memory that was different for you. Was there any difference in what Dumbledore said to Malfoy, in that final scene?"

"Not that I can tell, no. In mine, Malfoy was able to Stun the Death Eaters on the scene, then Snape when he came in. But before that... I'm pretty sure everything is the same. This Malfoy... looked like he was thinking about doing the same thing, but waited too long."

"Okay," said Kingsley, wanting to press this Harry further, but knowing that time was limited. "Let's go outside."

Everyone was waiting at the table. "I saw memories of the other Harry's past," Harry told the other DA members. "They're the same as mine, up to the point when their Malfoy didn't turn against Voldemort—"

"Don't say the name!" shouted a panicked Parvati.

Harry rolled his eyes. "We're half a world away, nothing's going to happen. Anyway, that Harry left me a short message, apologizing for the lack of information, and asking me to cooperate with Kingsley and ask you to do the same, which I'm doing. He wants us to, every day, write a note about

* * * * *

Island Harry suddenly found himself sitting in a tent with Hermione, Ron, and Malfoy. He exchanged surprised glances with Ron and Hermione.

"Potter?"

"Yes?"

“You were in the middle of a sentence.”

“Ah. No, you mean the other Harry Potter was in the middle of a sentence.”

Malfoy sighed. “Well, some damn Harry Potter was going on about something. You’re the ones they talked about? On some island?”

“Yep. That’s us. So, did you get the note?”

Annoyed, Malfoy replied, “Yes, I did. And it’s nice to know that you have such little regard for me that you think I can’t tell that my lifelong friend is lying to me. I’m not an idiot, you know.”

“Gee, sorry, Malfoy. How stupid of me not to realize that you had a built-in lie detector. I shouldn’t have tried to help.”

“Well, I’m not sure that I accept your apology,” deadpanned Malfoy. “Can’t you three tell if you’re lying to each other?”

“Maybe Crabbe is just a bad liar,” offered Ron.

“Could be,” admitted Malfoy. “I think he’d normally be better, but he was under pressure. The Dark Lord must’ve threatened him, told him he had to convince me to let him join us, and that probably caused him to lie badly. I’d still be able to tell, but this was pretty easy. So, Potter, how did you know he was lying? How could you even hear us? Or did you know some other way?”

Have to do this again, thought Harry. “Do a Reveal Magic spell on my forehead.”

Malfoy looked at him as if his rationality were in question. “Am I going to see some dirty picture? Or is this some variation on ‘pull my finger?’”

“Just do it, Malfoy.”

Malfoy did, and was clearly astonished at seeing the mark of the Auror Leader on Harry’s forehead. “How...”

“Long story, but I shouldn’t tell it anyway.” He gave the same truncated explanation of what had happened as Kingsley was giving the other Harry. “The Auror Leader has certain enhanced abilities, two of which are keen hearing, and the ability to tell if someone is lying.” Harry now found himself wishing he hadn’t left the note, and therefore need to provide an explanation of what happened in the future, but he couldn’t have known that Malfoy could tell that Crabbe was lying. I did the right thing, he thought.

“So, from our point of view, the most important thing is to make sure the timeline doesn’t change. And that’s in your interest too, because in our timeline, Volde—“

With lightning speed, Malfoy grabbed his wand and pointed it at Harry, who found himself Silenced. “Moron!” screamed Malfoy. “You absolute moron! That’s the second time I’ve had to do that! If you’re from the future, you should know that saying the name is like inviting death!”

Sighing, Harry touched his wand and canceled the spell. “You’re right,” he admitted. “I’m sorry about that,” he added, looking at Ron and Hermione as well.

“Oh, good, you’re sorry,” retorted Malfoy with heavy sarcasm. “That’ll be good to know when they’re torturing us because I wasn’t fast enough with my wand. Think a little, will you?”

“He said he was sorry,” protested Hermione. “What more do you want him to say?”

“I want him to not do it anymore! I mean, what did the prophecy say? ‘He is the one who can defeat the Dark Lord, provided he isn’t so stupid that he gets himself and others captured before he can manage it?’ Maybe you won’t forgive him so quickly if you end up getting tortured because he couldn’t keep his—“

“That’s enough!” barked Harry, eyes flashing in anger at Malfoy.

Surprised, Malfoy glanced at Hermione, then back at Harry. "It happened!" he exclaimed. "That's what happened! And you forgave him? Very generous of you. If it was me, I'd never let him forget it."

"And that's one of the many differences between me and you," she said coldly.

"How did you work that out, anyway?" asked Ron.

"It's called being able to read faces, expressions," said Malfoy, feigning great tolerance. "For example, just by looking at your eyes right now, I can tell that you're a slow-witted dolt! And that's useful information."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, don't let it get around. I like to keep up appearances."

Malfoy's eyebrows went up a little. "Okay, I'll admit I didn't see that coming. I thought you'd go for my throat."

"My other self probably would," agreed Ron. "I've been trying to get over that."

"Good idea," said Malfoy. "It's a weakness. So, Potter, why don't you pick a phrase to use when you want to refer to the Dark Lord, so you don't get us captured?"

Harry recalled a conversation he'd had with Kingsley and a few American Aurors. "I'm going to call him 'what's-his-name.'"

"You really have to taunt him? I think it's bad luck."

"Didn't you taunt Crabbe for saying that?"

"I didn't taunt the Dark Lord, though. What's wrong with 'You-Know-Who?'"

"I don't like it. Too fearful. How about, 'The V-Man?'"

Ron grinned. "I like that, actually."

“Whatever, I’m not going to argue with you about it. Now, what were you going to say before I averted catastrophe?”

Harry paused to remember. “Oh, yeah, I was saying that in our timeline, what’s-his-name ended up going to his great reward, so trying to match our timeline—the results, at least—is good for you too.”

“Okay, sounds good,” agreed Malfoy. “So, if you tell me what happened in your timeline, maybe we can make it happen.”

“Well, I want to be careful with that,” said Harry. “I worry that people here knowing could cause—“

“Harry,” interrupted Ron, “hasn’t the ship already sailed on that? I mean, look at how phenomenally different this is from what we were doing. Malfoy’s sitting here with us, for one. Also, he said he saved you from saying the V-Man’s name once before; maybe that would’ve been the time you did say it, so that’s changed. I know the time is probably wrong, but you get the idea. Fixing this timeline would be like trying to fill a salt shaker by pouring it through the holes in the top.”

“I think a better analogy,” said Hermione, “would be herding hyperactive cats. The more you try, the worse it gets—“

“Because by all means, we’ll defeat the Dark Lord by coming up with the perfect analogy,” muttered Malfoy. “Let’s continue wasting time with this.”

“Anyway,” continued Hermione, with an annoyed glance at Malfoy, “I was going to say, I think Ron is right, this is too far gone. Malfoy, have you been told how we’re expected to defeat what’s-his-name?”

Ron gave her a mildly disappointed look. “Sorry,” she said with a light shrug. “Saying ‘the V-Man’ just isn’t me.”

“Yes, Potter told me about the Horcruxes. It didn’t take me long to work out that he himself was one, which, brilliant analytical mind that

he is, he hadn't thought of. But you clearly had, as you weren't happy with me for letting him know. We had an argument about it. I said, and still think, it's better for him to know."

"You wouldn't say that if it was in your head."

"Wow, your other self said those exact words. Some things haven't changed. But I'd rather know than not know; I could figure out how to get it the hell out of me. But maybe it's good that we have you here. How did you get it out?"

"I let V—" Harry cut himself off as Malfoy reached for his wand. "Sorry. I let what's-his-name do the Killing Curse on me."

Malfoy did a double-take. "Oh! Why didn't I think of that? Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! And of course by 'brilliant,' I mean 'idiotic.'"

"Yeah, I gathered that."

"Well, maybe it's not so good that we have you here. And how did it happen that he didn't actually do it?"

"He did," said Harry. Malfoy looked at Ron and Hermione, who nodded somberly.

"Okaaaaay... what the hell, I'll go along with this... and after you died, then what happened?"

"Obviously, I didn't die."

"Of course, because Harry Potter is so super-amazing that the Killing Curse has no effect on him. Right?"

"Well, I wouldn't say 'no effect.' Something weird happened, and even now I'm not 100% sure

He was standing near the common table, looking at the trainees. After a pause to get used to the fact that he was no longer speaking to Malfoy, he spoke. "Okay. Did anything important happen to anyone?"

George spoke up quickly. "I know you may not like this, but I told Fred that in my time he's dead, and it happened in the Hogwarts battle. I'm sorry, but I just can't stand there with him, talk and joke with him, and know that, and not say anything about it. I just can't do it."

There was silence around the table; everyone seemed to be looking at Harry for his reaction. "Well, I can't say I'm thrilled, but I can't say I'm terribly bothered either. As Ron pointed out a few minutes ago over there, things are now so hugely different that we can't exactly expect things to go just as they did for us. I still don't want us to go out of our way to make things any more different, but I understand why you did it. Anybody else?"

Dean spoke. "Justin and I were together, at Colin's home. He and Dennis want to do something about the situation; they just don't know what."

"I, my counterpart that is," added Justin, "had apparently sent Dean and Colin owls to keep in touch, knowing that Muggle-borns were in trouble in the new order. He invited us to stay for a few days. Apparently his family's pretty well-to-do, a big house with extra rooms. We told him and Dennis about this whole switching thing, but no details, and managed to avoid saying anything about his death."

Harry nodded, and thought for a few seconds. "You have my permission to tell him about that, especially since it's almost impossible it'll happen the same way anyway. I don't want anyone lying about what's happened. Hiding information is okay, but don't lie. We want the people over there to be able to trust us, and they won't if they catch us in a lie."

"Anyway... Dean, Justin, that may not be a bad idea. I'd encourage you four to stay in close contact. I'm not sure what would be a good idea for you to do, but it couldn't hurt—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione, with an apologetic glance at Harry for the interruption. "They could focus on trying to figure out what's going on! Maybe they could get access to some information over there."

"That makes sense," agreed Justin. "Not that I'd have the first idea where to look, of course, but at least we're free, whereas most of you are at Hogwarts. Hermione, any ideas on where to look?"

She shrugged. "Libraries."

"But we can't—"

"I mean, Muggle libraries," she clarified. "Not that I'm optimistic about finding anything, but it couldn't hurt. But yes, I know very well that Muggle-borns can't operate openly in wizarding England right now."

"We could go to another country!" suggested Dean, looking pleased at the idea.

"That would make sense," agreed Terry. "It'd have to be English-speaking, so Australia or America."

"It shouldn't be Australia," said George. "I think I mentioned that George, my host there, said that it was a very young country in wizarding terms. They wouldn't have much experience with that."

"But he also said, and this is interesting, that he'd spent a while some time ago talking with an Indian wizard, someone who knew something about space/time issues. If I could contact him and explain our problem, he might be able to get ahold of that guy, and we could talk to him, or he could direct us to someone who could be of help. Either way, it's definitely worth trying."

"Sounds good," said Harry, "but I'm not sure about the idea of one of us leaving the island, then this happens again, and the person from the other side has no idea where they are, etc. You get the idea."

"How's this," suggested Kingsley. "I go with George to Australia, soon after one of the switches. They seem to be a few days apart right now, so it shouldn't be so dangerous. Even if it happens while we're there, I'm there to explain it to him. After we explain everything to the Fosters, George comes back, I stay, and follow up as needed. Think that would work, George?"

"I don't see why not," agreed George. "The only possible problem is that George, or the family, could be in the middle of helping someone else, or have some other project going. I know they'll help us if they can."

Kingsley looked at Harry. "No time like the present."

Harry hesitated. "A switch did just happen, but..."

George spoke again. "We can't do it this minute, though. They're a few hours behind us, and I wouldn't fancy waking them up. I'd give it a couple of hours at least."

"I'll use that time to think about it," said Harry. "We'll put off starting today's training while I do that. Kingsley, I'd like you to start preparing to go in case I decide to do that now, and I'd like you and Hestia to think about spells we're more likely to need on the other side. Things to help remaining hidden, staying out of sight, things like that. We'll continue training, but this situation is now our number one priority. Everyone needs to think about what they can and should do on the other side. Those of you at Hogwarts, the best thing you can do is avoid drawing attention to yourselves. I hope your counterparts aren't spreading the word about what's going on, because it could lead to danger if the Dark wizards found out."

"I also want to ask you to not say anything about anything I've told you about Malfoy, that is, the other Malfoy. I don't want anything like that to get out on the other side. My impression is that that Harry and Malfoy aren't exactly best buddies, but they trust each other, at least for now. I don't want to see that get screwed up over something unnecessary and avoidable."

Terry spoke. "Not about the Malfoy thing, but what about talking about this situation, those of us who are at Hogwarts, to the other DA members there? Padma and I were talking over there, we wouldn't mind taking Anthony into our confidence. Not only because he might have some interesting ideas, but also because we could leave messages with him, to tell our counterparts, and he could update us on what's going on. I think he could be trusted not to tell anyone."

“Of course,” added Padma, “for all we know, our counterparts have already done that. Kingsley and Hestia, you should ask them next time who they’ve told. I hope they’ll have some discretion.”

“I think they’ll know,” said Neville, “that talking about it would bring unwelcome attention. Parvati, do you think Lavender could be trusted with this?”

Parvati hesitated. “I hate to say it, but her discretion isn’t always the best. We may not have much choice, though. A Gryffindor seventh year should know, and she’s the only one there. We’ll see how it goes.”

A few minutes later the discussion was over, and Harry went back to his tent to lie down and think. He found he couldn’t escape the dread that this would end in disaster, and that by taking them back in time, he would be responsible. He knew it was unproductive to think along those lines, but he also knew he couldn’t help it. It was hard to put aside such thoughts for long enough to think analytically about the situation.

He decided to follow Kingsley’s suggestion to allow him and George to go to Australia immediately. He would have preferred to have Kingsley around to help communicate with their counterparts, but even the smallest chance to stop the switching would have to have priority.

His mind drifted to another doomsday scenario. Shaking himself out of it, he cursed himself again for having somehow gotten them in this position. I can’t even go to a deserted island without something happening, he thought in frustration.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 8, Keeping Secrets: Harry, Ron, and Hermione try to adjust to the very peculiar notion of being allies of Draco Malfoy as they struggle to determine the nature and cause of their predicament.

From Chapter 8: He gently nudged her head with his hand, and looked her in the eyes. "I swear to God, we're going to get you out of there. That's the first thing we do when we get back."

Chapter 8

Keeping Secrets

George returned two hours after leaving, reporting that all had gone well, and the Fosters were very willing to help. George Foster would accompany Kingsley to India, where they would seek out his acquaintance together. Harry knew that Kingsley had hoped to avoid traveling outside Australia if possible, to minimize timeline-related dangers, but the alternative was asking Foster to impose on the Indian man a trip to Australia, which as the one seeking a favor he didn't feel he had a right to do. Realistically, there was almost zero danger. Then again, he thought ruefully, there had been almost zero danger in going to the island in the first place.

The atmosphere was tense the next two mornings because all the switches so far had happened in the morning, but nothing out of the ordinary occurred. On the third morning, some people darkly joked at breakfast that this would be the day it happened again, and an hour after training started, it did.

They were walking alongside a rocky creek; Harry stopped and looked around, as did Ron and Hermione. Malfoy appeared confused for a minute, then understood. "It's you three again."

"It's us," agreed Harry.

Malfoy continued walking; Harry decided to follow him. "So, you were saying? The Dark Lord—and I'll remind you again not to say the name—he did the Killing Curse on you, and you sort of died, I think was where we left it."

Harry finished explaining it. "I'm still not sure why it happened that way," he concluded. "I think he and I were linked somehow when he used my blood, but that's just a wild guess. We were linked a lot, too damn much if you ask me. Did you tell our counterparts about that?"

"Mmm hmmm," Malfoy confirmed. "Potter was less than thrilled at the thought."

“So was I.”

“It was interesting to watch, actually. Granger and Weasley were getting on his back about it, as if he had actually done it! She said it was just the sort of thing he would do.”

Harry was surprised. “That’s a little strange, since I don’t have much of a record of committing suicide.”

“I think she meant, acting impulsively, without really thinking it over. I had to tell them I didn’t have all the details, but she said that he must have done it without telling her and Weasley, since they’d have stopped him if he had.”

“Pretty clever, that Hermione,” mused Ron.

“I think,” said Hermione to Malfoy, “she, I, also meant that it was like him to do something heroic and self-sacrificing. Though I know you’d never give him credit for that.”

Malfoy snorted. “Heroic and self-sacrificing people don’t live very long.”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, well, we’ve already had this conversation.” To Malfoy’s quizzical glance, he amended his statement. “Okay, the other you. So, let me ask you, what’s going on over here? What’s the plan?”

“We’re looking for Horcruxes, of course. But you’d know where they are, wouldn’t you? This could really speed things up.”

Harry sighed. “Let’s sit down a bit,” he said, having noticed a group of small boulders that could serve as temporary places to sit.

He looked at Malfoy. “What you say makes sense, of course, but I’m far from sure that’s what I want to do.”

Puzzled, Malfoy asked, “Why not? Didn’t Weasley say last time that the timeline is already hopelessly compromised? As long as we get

all the Horcruxes and the Dark Lord ends up dead, what difference does it make?"

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry, their expressions indicating that they didn't disagree with Malfoy. "I didn't say I wouldn't do it, just that I wasn't sure. I'm just... reluctant to get too involved over here."

"Well, if it keeps up like this, you may be getting a lot more involved than you hoped," pointed out Malfoy. "It seems like these are getting longer all the time. At some point, you may just end up staying here."

Ron suppressed a shudder. "Now, that's a scary thought. We end up here all the time, then a year from now, we start going back, and it happens all over again... could we really spend eternity doing this over and over?"

"Calm down, Weasley. At least you'd have me to keep you company."

"I didn't know you had such a good sense of humor," said Ron sarcastically.

"Lot you don't know about me. Now, Potter, if you don't want to help us, do you have some other idea? Just sitting out the time you're here will only work for so long. Want to at least tell me where the Horcruxes are?"

"Speaking of that," said Hermione, "Where's the one I took from Umbridge? If it were here, we'd all know."

"It's in a safe place," said Malfoy casually.

Harry traded stunned glances with Ron and Hermione. "They let you keep it? Do they know where it is?"

"There was... a little debate over this," allowed Malfoy.

Ron scoffed. "I'll bet."

Malfoy glared at Ron; Ron stared back as if to say, 'you can make jokes but I can't?' Harry waited a few seconds, then said to Malfoy, "Well?"

"Before I tell you, I want to ask this. Did you guys drag it around with you until you were able to destroy it?"

"What else would we do with it?" asked Ron.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "You want to tell him?" he said to Hermione.

She looked at Ron. "Malfoy means we could have buried it, or secured it in some other way." To Malfoy, she added, "We just didn't think we could take that kind of chance. We had to be 100% sure that nothing would happen to it."

"Yeah, the other Granger said that too. So, you dragged it around for, I don't know, months, knowing the effect it has, just so you could avoid the one in a million chance that if you buried it, someone could somehow find it even though there's no reason in the world to look in the spot where you buried it. Not to mention that you're a lot more likely to do something stupid to get caught with it than without it. Sometimes, you've got to take a calculated risk.

"Anyway... I have a plan, by which I hope to extract the Horcrux from Potter without killing him. I don't know for sure that it will work, and I don't know exactly how to do it. My efforts right now are directed at finding out. The current location of the Horcrux has to do with that plan. But I don't think the plan is going to work if the other three know what it is, especially Potter. He might not agree to it.

"I think the plan I have is the only way to defeat the Dark Lord that doesn't involve Potter's death. Now, I know what you just said, but since even you're not sure how or why it happened, I don't think it's a good idea for him to try it. It might very well not work this time, for whatever reason. Agree or disagree?"

The three exchanged glances. "I wouldn't want to risk it," said Hermione; Ron nodded in agreement.

“Thought so. Anyway, we went back and forth over this for a few hours; they, especially Potter, said they couldn’t trust me to have this plan and not tell them, even though it was indisputable that I’d betrayed the Dark Lord, and had nowhere to go except your side.

“Finally, we agreed on this. I would, and did, take an Unbreakable Vow that, for a period of one hour, one person—they chose Granger, of course—would ask me questions, and the vow was that I wouldn’t lie or deliberately mislead in answering them. I could refuse to answer if I chose, but I couldn’t lie. We also agreed that the questions I’d be asked would be negotiated in advance. For example, I wasn’t required to tell them my plan, but I did assure them that what I’d said to that point wasn’t a lie, that I had no ulterior motives, and that my true and real goal was the death of the Dark Lord. She asked the questions, I answered them, and they were satisfied. I could go off and do something by myself, and they wouldn’t worry about what I was doing.”

“I have a question,” said Ron. “You said you had nowhere else to go, but you’d have to think that even given that you betrayed him, if you brought him Harry Potter on a silver platter, you’d be forgiven.”

“If you think that, then you don’t know much about the Dark Lord,” replied Malfoy somberly. “Results are important to him, but loyalty is even more important. Granger mentioned this; I told her to feel free to add it to the list of questions I’d be asked. She did, and I told them that I honestly believed that if I went back and handed him Potter, he’d cheerfully accept, and then have me killed right alongside Potter. No, sad to say, you guys are my only hope now.”

“Why is it ‘sad to say?’” asked Ron.

“Because the Chosen One here has now almost said the Dark Lord’s name twice. The three of you, I don’t question your determination, but I do question your competence. I’d like to have a little more confidence in the people into whose hands I’m putting my life.”

“Well, we’ll do our best,” said Harry. “Are you going to tell us your plan, or is it important that we don’t know as well?”

“I’ll think that over,” said Malfoy. “I’ll let you know next time you’re back. Now, how about the location of the Horcruxes?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Ah. Do you mean it like, you show me yours, I’ll show you mine?”

Harry shook his head. “No, this isn’t conditional. I’m inclined to tell you, and to help you get rid of them, but I do want a little time to convince myself that this is something I should be doing.”

Malfoy inclined his head in a half-shrug. “So, what do we do in the meantime?”

“What were we doing before?” asked Ron.

“Looking for some sort of abandoned Muggle house,” replied Malfoy, “or a house that wasn’t being used much, way out in the countryside. Maybe a summer home, since winter is coming. It would be nice to have a base of operations.”

Hermione spoke. “Wouldn’t that be unfair to—“

“Oh, please, don’t make me have this argument again,” moaned Malfoy. “I already promised the other Granger that if the Muggles came back, we’d leave, all right? I don’t fancy spending another half hour on this.” Clearly not convinced, Hermione gave him a wary look, but said nothing.

“What did you argue about for a half hour?” wondered Harry.

“There was a lot of repetition,” admitted Malfoy. “She was sure that I would end up hurting, or stealing the house from, the Muggles. Took me a while to convince her that I wasn’t going to.”

“Gee,” said Ron sarcastically, “I wonder why she would think that, what with—“

“Ron,” Harry interrupted as Malfoy looked ready to retort. “We’re working with him, so we should probably try to avoid any

unnecessary conflict.” He glanced at Hermione, letting her know that the message was for her as well. Ron shrugged, as if to say that what he’d been about to say hadn’t been all that important anyway.

Harry stood. “Why don’t we continue on,” he suggested. The others nodded, and they moved on.

After a minute, Ron asked conversationally, “So, Malfoy, what’s going on with your parents now?”

Furious, Malfoy whirled on Ron. “I already said that—“

Ron’s eyes went wide as Malfoy cut himself off, then exhaled sharply. “I told the others that that subject’s not to be brought up.”

Ron exchanged a glance with Hermione, then uttered a word that Harry never thought he’d hear Ron say to Malfoy. “Sorry.”

Harry saw Malfoy’s acknowledgment of the apology in his eyes, which was as close as Malfoy got to expressing it. He looked at the ground, saying nothing. Harry wondered what was happening to them, and he was sure that Ron and Hermione were now wondering the same thing.

Soon back on the island, the group had their usual post-switch meeting to exchange information. In his quarters a few hours later, he looked up to see Ron and Hermione enter. “Hey,” he greeted them.

“How are you doing?” she asked him as they all sat.

“Not bad,” he said. “Better than Malfoy’s parents, I’d bet.”

Hermione grunted. “Not that Lucius doesn’t deserve anything he gets, with what he did to Ginny in second year. But I can see why Malfoy’s sensitive about it. They may be dead, tortured, living in fear... for all we know, Malfoy himself may not know what’s happened to them. But their son betrayed Voldemort, so you have to think his parents aren’t having an easy time.”

“What’s your guess as to why he did it, given that it’d put his parents in such danger?”

“I’d guess,” said Ron, “that it wasn’t foremost on his mind then. Even in our timeline he didn’t really want to kill Dumbledore, and even with two Death Eaters there, really hesitated. In the pressure of that moment, making that decision, he might not have thought about it like that. Then he does it, and maybe regrets it later—not that he regrets not killing Dumbledore, I mean, but regrets the effect it has on his parents. So, he doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“It makes sense,” agreed Hermione. “Something like that. For us, the question is, does this pose a danger to us, or his counterparts? I wouldn’t mind knowing exactly what they asked him. Maybe we could leave a note asking our counterparts to tell us that.”

“Not a bad idea,” he agreed. “But you heard what Hestia said, about how some of our counterparts aren’t happy with the lack of information they’re getting about what’s going on, why they’re on an island. I’m not sure how much cooperation we can rely on from them unless we start answering every question they want to ask.”

“But she said the other Harry was urging them to cooperate.”

“The other Harry doesn’t have the kind of authority over the others that I do here,” Harry pointed out. “We think our reason for withholding information is good, but since they don’t know, it might not seem so good to them.

“Now, I wanted to ask you two about what I was talking about to Malfoy over there... should we be helping them get Horcruxes?”

“I think we should,” said Ron. “If we start spending more and more time over there, and we’re not trying, we could actually hinder them. This timeline is so different now that it feels as though we shouldn’t worry about that. I know you’re worried, and I understand, but it’s not fair to them if we don’t.”

“Harry,” said Hermione quietly, “this isn’t your fault, you know.”

He looked at her quizzically. "You looked like you felt that it was," she explained. "You've had that look a few times recently, like you got us into this or something. It's not something you could have foreseen."

"I'm Auror Leader," he said somberly. "That makes it my responsibility."

"And if you make a mistake that gets us into this kind of situation, then we'll tell you," she pressed. "But this wasn't a mistake. This was just... something weird that happened. You're going to be making a lot of big decisions, and you can't function if you blame yourself and feel bad every time you make a decision and something goes wrong. There's a difference between something being your responsibility and it being your fault."

He paused, mulling it over. "Maybe, but—"

Kingsley opened the tent's door. "Just got back," he said. "Do you want the briefing here, or out there with everybody?"

"Is there something you specifically think I should be told privately?" he asked.

Kingsley shook his head. "Just giving you the option."

"Out there, then."

Outside his tent, Harry made the whistling sound with his wand, though most everyone was around anyway. They sat at the table.

"Okay," said Kingsley. "It took a few days because the man we were looking for was very busy, and wasn't available at first. Once we were able to get him, he was very willing to help. He was quite pleased to see Mr. Foster again," he added, with a glance at George. "Having spent some time with Foster, I can see why George was so sure that he wasn't the source of the problem. He comes across as utterly sincere and reliable. A very good man."

"The three of us had a long and interesting conversation, but right now, I'll get to the important part. The Indian man, his name was

Sanjay, felt based on what I told him that while he couldn't discount it entirely, it was very unlikely that what we're experiencing is time displacement. He emphasized that for events as rare as this there are no absolutes, so we can't totally rule anything in or out. But he's pretty sure that it isn't the case, mainly because we remember contradictions. As we've talked about, there should be either smooth adjustment or, with this many differences, a catastrophic event. He felt that since neither has happened, it isn't a time issue."

"Then, what?" asked Terry.

"He thinks that it's not a time shift, but rather, a dimensional shift," said Kingsley. "He explained that while it's hardly a certainty, many theorists in this area believe that there are many dimensions. A few think there are only two, or a limited number, while most others think the number is nearly infinite. He talked at length about this, more than an hour. He thinks this is far more likely. He emphasized repeatedly that nothing is certain, but said that if he had to act on the basis of an assumption, this would be it."

Harry spoke to the table. "Can anyone think of any reason, looking at it in those terms, why this might have happened?" He was met with silence and blank looks. To Kingsley, he asked, "Did the Indian guy, Sanjay, did he have any idea why this might have happened, and how to fix it?"

"I'm afraid not," said Kingsley. "Of course I told him what happened with you and Fawkes immediately after we got here. He thinks it's highly unlikely that it has anything to do with it, but again, he can't be sure. One question is, if this involves another dimension, does that mean that Fawkes took Harry to this other dimension, to see the 'other' Dumbledore? Or back in time, in our dimension? Either is possible, though knowing phoenixes, back in our time seems much more likely. We don't even know that phoenixes can do that, if other dimensions even exist.

"I asked him, if this other dimension exists, why does it seem to be identical to ours in every respect until Malfoy's encounter with Dumbledore, after which it diverges significantly—"

“Excuse me,” Cho broke in. “I should say that mine hasn’t diverged at all. Everything is happening exactly as I remember it, except for a few small things that are the result of this happening to us, the switching back.”

“Me too,” agreed Angelina.

“Maybe I should say,” clarified Kingsley, “that the closer one is to Malfoy must affect how different it is. I was going to say that Sanjay said that under one theory, one universe can essentially split into two, create an offshoot, when an important decision point is reached. One goes one way, one goes the other. Deciding whether to kill someone is an important decision point. He said that one universe could have split into three at this point. In one, Malfoy kills Dumbledore. In another, the one we remember, Snape arrives before Malfoy makes the decision. In the third, Malfoy makes the decision and turns on the Death Eaters. There could even be others, he said, based on that one decision point.”

“I gotta say,” said Lee, “that this sounds kind of... off the wall.”

“I’d say that too,” said Corner, “except that this whole situation we’re in is pretty off the wall too. So any theory about how or why this happened is bound to be off the wall as well.”

Kingsley nodded. “That’s a good way to put it, Michael. I think that’s exactly right. If I’d heard this a year ago, I’d have thought it was esoteric theory, suited for people who live their lives in scientific academies and ivory towers. But, here we are, so we have no choice but to consider the bizarre as if it weren’t.

“Now, one other thing... he theorizes that this started as soon as we reached the island, but we didn’t know it because at first, the switches were for infinitesimal periods of time, and spaced far apart. As time went by, he thinks, they started happening more and more often, and for longer and longer periods of time. Based on the times I told him, he guesses that by Christmas we’ll have reached the midpoint, twelve hours there and twelve hours here. How long was the last one?”

“Forty-two minutes,” reported Hermione.

“Wow, exactly what he guessed it would be. He thinks the next one will be two hours and ten minutes.”

“Terry and I did the analysis,” said Hermione. “We came up with that as well. Then after December, and this is when it starts getting bad...”

Kingsley nodded. “By the end of January, the time you’ll be spending here will be the same as the time you’re spending there now. And by March, you’ll virtually be living there.”

“And,” said Ron glumly, “you said this guy had no ideas about how we get back.”

“That’s right,” said Kingsley.

Again, there was quiet around the table. “Let’s look at the practicalities of it, then,” said Harry. “Malfoy wants us to help him find the Horcruxes, which after all is what our counterparts are doing. If we assume there’s no timeline to screw up, then there’s no reason not to, right? But then in terms of going and getting them, suppose we come up with some extremely risky plan, like breaking into Gringotts. Do we need our counterparts’ permission? How about when we’re there for more than twelve hours a day? At what point does it stop being their lives, and start becoming ours?”

“All excellent questions,” said Kingsley. “It’s hard to say. Since the next one will be for a fairly long time, I should be able to have a talk with them about this. I’ll also talk to their Harry privately, since what he’ll agree to is an important factor in all this.”

“Is this something you want to do,” asked Ron, “or think you should do?”

Harry hadn’t thought of it that way. “It’s not as though I enjoy it, of course. But it seems to me that while I’m over there, I should be doing what I think he would be doing. And if I’m better able to do it, then it makes sense that I should. How about you two? Are you okay with this?”

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance. "Like you, I suppose," said Hermione. "I'm not thrilled to have to do it all over again, and I can't imagine how Malfoy hopes to get that Horcrux out of their Harry, but..."

"Thankfully, that's not our problem," said Ron.

Ginny, looking surprised, spoke up. "Do you feel less close to that Harry just because, you know, he's not your Harry?" Hermione also looked at Ron as though she disagreed with his last comment.

Ron shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't mean it like that. Just that it's a hard problem, and... my Harry's already been through it. And I'm glad about that."

That wasn't what it had sounded like to Harry, but he wasn't inclined to press Ron on it, as he was also glad it wasn't his problem. "Okay," he said. "We'll talk to Malfoy next time, develop tentative plans, and tell him to discuss it with our counterparts. Kingsley, when you talk to them next time, first talk to their Harry alone. I want him to be able to decide whether he wants the others to be told that I'm Auror Leader."

"Why?" wondered Neville.

"I don't want it to get out, to the public," said Harry. "The more people know, the more likely that is."

"But how do we explain the whole island thing to them if we don't explain that Harry's Auror Leader?" asked Neville.

"As I said, lying's not my first choice, but we could tell them about the deaths of all the Aurors and that they're here as Auror recruits, simply leaving out the information that Harry's Auror Leader. They'd have no reason to think otherwise."

"But Malfoy already knows that Harry's Auror Leader," pointed out Ron.

"And the worst that happens is that your counterpart and mine know," said Hermione. "I think they could be trusted not to spread it around."

“Do we really want to lie to our counterparts?” asked Neville. “I mean, no disrespect to Harry, or his counterpart, but it really doesn’t seem like a good idea. We need them to trust us, and vice versa. The reason doesn’t seem worth the risk it involves, and I’m not sure we should put that decision in the hands of the other Harry who, again, no offense Harry, might put his own privacy interests above more important group-based ones.”

Again Harry paused, but no one seemed to want to respond. Finally Harry did. “I can’t say you’re wrong, Neville,” he admitted. “There are things I’ve tended to keep to myself that maybe I shouldn’t have. I’ll think about it, and make the decision before the next switch.”

“Speaking of that,” asked Dean, “why didn’t you tell us what you were doing last year, when you were hunting the Horcruxes? We could have helped you.”

Harry held back from pointing out that the answer was obvious. “Dumbledore told me to tell no one else but Ron and Hermione. The reason he did it was that it was vital to keep secret the fact that we were hunting Horcruxes, because if Voldemort had known, he would’ve tried to collect them and hide them better, or worse, make new ones. I don’t think it was that Dumbledore didn’t trust you, and certainly it wasn’t that I didn’t trust you. He just thought it was much safer that fewer people knew.”

“At the cost of whatever benefit you could have gotten with a little help,” pointed out Neville. “I have to say, I don’t find that totally persuasive. So I want to say for the record that I’d like to help. I don’t know how my counterpart will feel about it, but I think he’d be on board with this. So, that’s up to you. And your counterpart, I guess.”

“I’m with Neville,” said Seamus, as Dean nodded. Soon, most everyone was nodding or making comments indicating their agreement.

“Okay, I understand,” said Harry. “I’ll start working on a plan to make use of whatever you all can bring to the operation. Neville, what you should do right now is work your magic on the Room of Requirement,

get it set up as necessary. Write a note to your counterpart explaining what you're doing, and ask him to stay there, make sure it stays open. Start enlisting the help of DA members who aren't here, but of course, keep it quiet. Everyone, write a note to your counterpart, and ask them to write back. Hermione, Terry, when's the next switch?"

"The day after tomorrow, late afternoon," said Terry.

"Okay. You don't have to do it right now, but by lunchtime the day after tomorrow. You'll have some time to think about it. After breakfast on that day, I'll let you know how I'm thinking."

Back in his quarters after the meeting, Harry reflected on the recent news. Of course it was less than certain that they were changing dimensions rather than time, but it made sense, and the thought was quite comforting. He wouldn't worry nearly as much about catastrophes, just about stopping the switching and helping their counterparts defeat Voldemort. He wondered which was more important.

After a while, his ruminations were interrupted by Kingsley opening his door. "Are you okay to talk a bit?"

Harry waved him in. "Sure. What is it?"

They sat on the sofa. "I've been doing some strategic and tactical thinking, and I thought I'd run some of it by you. It's too early to do these things, but it'd be good to start thinking about it." Harry gestured for Kingsley to continue.

"An important possibility—again, for the future, if and when you're there for more than half the time—is that you could go public as Auror Leader." Harry's eyebrows went high. "Yes, I can understand why you haven't thought of that," said Kingsley wryly. "I know it wouldn't be your favorite thing to do. But the symbol shows over there, and your Leader-specific abilities work. You could announce, in a public place, that you're Auror Leader, and assert that Aurors should follow you. I believe that most would do so.

“It would be a very stark and confrontational thing to do; it would basically be a declaration of war against the current government. There would be negative aspects, such as that it would shake the Dark wizards out of their complacency, and cause them to perhaps overreact in a way that would cause danger to ordinary citizens. The positive reason to do it would be that it would alert the population to the true nature of the government—most people realistically know, but as long as Voldemort isn’t doing anything terrible affecting them, they’re willing to pretend it isn’t happening. That’s why it was clever of Voldemort to only attack the Muggle-borns. There’s enough prejudice out there that people were willing to throw them over the side. But if you rubbed people’s noses in the fact that their leaders were Dark wizards, they might start to resist more, out of shame if nothing else. To me, the biggest advantage would be getting the Aurors on your side. But anyone with any connection to you would suffer. The Weasleys would have to go into hiding before you announced, as would DA members.” Kingsley stopped speaking and leaned back, waiting for Harry to respond.

“Wow.” Speaking slowly, he said, “You’re right, I hadn’t thought of it. A year ago, as you know, I’d never have been willing to do it. But now, I can imagine it. I can see the possible good points, but it also seems possible that I could recruit Aurors while keeping it quiet.”

Kingsley looked doubtful. “Maybe, but the more you tell, the more likely it becomes that someone would betray the secret, and then you get the cost of being public without some of the benefit. Which reminds me, I was a little surprised that Dean and Neville questioned what Dumbledore did, telling you three to keep it secret. To me, that’s a no-brainer. I’d have preferred to know so I could’ve helped you, along with trustworthy Aurors. But one person gets captured, given Veritaserum, and that’s it. Which is why, and I wanted to mention this in private as well, you may want to seriously consider who you tell things to about your plans, and this could even include Ron and Hermione. Again, it’s not a question of trustworthiness, but like I said, Veritaserum.

“Another thing I wanted to mention is the possibility of infiltration, secret attacks. Your Auror Leader ability to Apparate anywhere is a huge tactical asset, and it’s easy to imagine ways to put it to good

use, combined with your Invisibility Cloak. It would, for example, not be overly difficult for you to abduct Thicknesse if you wanted to. I'm not specifically recommending that you do so, but you get my point."

Harry nodded, impressed; that hadn't occurred to him either. "That's interesting. I'll give that some thought, too. And maybe come up with a few ideas of my own."

"Just keep in mind," said Kingsley, "that Hestia and I are the only two that you can speculate about plans and tactical ideas with, with no fear that they could be discovered. Since we're here, there's no danger. And the last thing is that you should get in contact with my counterpart. Here's how you can find him..."

* * * * *

Two days later, Hermione and Terry predicted that the switch would occur at 5:56 p.m., plus or minus fifteen minutes. Harry decided that they should eat dinner early to be on the safe side, but it wasn't until 6:03 that he, Hermione, and Ron found themselves sitting with Malfoy, half-eaten food on their plates; Harry recognized it as the miniaturized food, the same type they had on the island. He exchanged a look with Ron and Hermione. "Well, they can finish up dinner over there," he said wryly. "They may like that food better anyway, and Luna did make extra."

Malfoy glanced around as he chewed a bite of his beef. "Ah, you're back. How long for this time? Granger had a guess, but I want to know what you think."

"Two hours and ten minutes," said Hermione.

"I guess you have better information than her. She said between two and two and a half hours, but couldn't be more sure than that.

"The others wanted to leave you notes, but we don't have much in the way of paper and ink. The main thing they wanted me to tell you was that I'm a little bit compromised. They understand and accept it, but thought you lot should know as well."

Wondering what Malfoy could mean, Harry gestured for him to continue. "What I mean by 'compromised' is that when I agreed to work for the Dark Lord, I had to take an Unbreakable Vow. I Vowed that I would follow all orders that he gave me; there were no other stipulations. Just that. Now, it's really not that important, since if I find myself in a position where he can order me to do something, well, let's just say death would be the least of my problems. But it's theoretically possible that I could be in his presence but not his captive, and he could order me to do something. My choices would be to do it or die, and as I've told the others, in that situation I'll do it, whatever it is. Just so you know."

"I understand," said Harry. "That makes sense. Why did you not die, though, when you decided not to kill Dumbledore?"

"Yeah, I wondered about that too," agreed Malfoy. "One of the reasons I hesitated so long was that I thought I might. My best guess is that the Dark Lord said that my 'task' was to kill Dumbledore, and what I Vowed was that I would follow all 'orders.' Maybe a task is different enough from an order that the spell didn't kick in."

"Why would he just limit it to orders?" wondered Ron. "Why not something like..."

"You will be totally loyal to the Dark Lord at all times, and do what you believe he would want you to do in his absence, like that," Malfoy suggested.

"Yes, exactly," agreed Ron.

"Yeah, I don't know," said Malfoy. "Maybe it gets into too many difficulties, people could drop dead just for making a mistake. The more specific, the better." He took another bite. "Aren't you going to finish your food?"

"We ate before we came," explained Harry.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "These things aren't cheap, you know. I don't have a whole lot of money left, and there may be things we need it for."

“Maybe I should go to Gringotts,” suggested Harry humorously.

Malfoy snorted. “Oh, yeah, go ahead and try.”

It occurred to Harry that it wouldn't be impossible for him to Apparate into his vault, due to his Auror Leader abilities. About to mention the possibility, he suddenly refrained. It was better, he realized, for Malfoy not to know about his abilities until it was necessary for him to. But on the other hand, Malfoy might get tactical and strategic ideas that he otherwise wouldn't if he knew about Harry's abilities. Is that worth the risk of his getting captured and the information taken from him? Harry sighed internally; another in the never-ending series of difficult choices he had to make. For now, he would say nothing.

“Oh,” said Malfoy as he finished his food, “the other Potter says that he's fine with your helping get the Horcruxes. The only thing he said was, ‘tell him not to get me into any situation I can't get out of.’ So, are you going to do it?”

“Yes.”

Malfoy's face lit up. “Great. So, where are they?”

“Sorry, but... need-to-know. Security.”

Malfoy gave Harry a very cross look. “You've got to be kidding. Look, if he captures me and gets it out of me before I die, in one case I know where they are and tell him, and in the other case, I don't know where they are, but I have to tell him that I may not know, but you do, and you're looking for them. In either case, he collects and hides them again. So, what's the damn difference?”

Harry was silent, thinking. “Stumped you, I see,” cracked Malfoy.

“He's got a point,” admitted Ron. “Since the V-man knows where they are... the only information that shouldn't be spread around is things he doesn't know. He does know this, so no harm in Malfoy knowing.”

"Sorry, but you'll just have to make sure I don't get captured," said Malfoy, with a superior expression.

"Yeah, okay," sighed Harry. "Sorry, Malfoy. There really are a lot of security things I have to worry about, but I was wrong on this one."

"Let's see. There's my counterpart, that's the hardest one. There's the locket, which we have. Well, you have. The one that took Dumbledore's hand, that one's dead. The one in Bellatrix's vault, that also won't be easy. The one at Hogwarts, Ravenclaw's diadem, easy. We can get it any time. That's, what..."

"Five," supplied Hermione. "Riddle's diary, dead. Lastly, Nagini."

"So," continued Ron, "two are dead: the diary and the one Dumbledore killed. Two we have or can easily get: the locket and the diadem. One is hard to get: the cup. Two are in living things. So, except for the diadem, there's nothing more we can do without alerting the V-man that we're gathering his Horcruxes."

"Could he make more?" asked Harry of no one in particular. "Malfoy, do you know anything about this?"

"Wish I did, but no."

"It seems as though he should be able to," said Hermione. "Remember, he made Nagini one, and I don't think Nagini was around when he was alive before, so he must have done it after he came back. So, I don't see any reason why he still couldn't do more. Now, the more he does, the more unstable he'll be, so in a way, it's good. But as we said before, he'll just hide them better next time."

"How did you get it out of Lestrangle's vault last time?" asked Malfoy.

Ron told the story. "We'd be hoping for a less dangerous way this time," he concluded.

"Yeah, I'd think," said Malfoy dryly. "I can't believe how you guys managed it, where you came from. You were so lucky, things just happened to go your way every time. But I have to say, I find it hard

to believe that if you tried the same thing this time, it would happen the same way. So, let's work on a plan that's not so preposterous."

"It was the best we could do at the time," muttered Hermione.

Malfoy shrugged. "I didn't mean that in a negative way."

Ron and Hermione exchanged disbelieving looks; Harry shook his head lightly, to communicate that they shouldn't pursue the matter further. With clear reluctance, they said nothing more.

"So anyway," said Harry, "the diadem should be done as soon as possible, and of course it's important that it's done quietly; no one at Hogwarts should know. Neville should be setting up the Room of Requirement as we speak. I won't try until Neville tells me everything's okay, and we'll be here for a longer time."

"How are you going to get into Hogwarts?" asked Malfoy.

"It's no problem. I can get in."

"Fine, be that way," cracked Malfoy in annoyance that appeared to be only somewhat feigned. Clearly he knew it was for good security reasons, but he still didn't like it.

"I'm sorry, Malfoy, but it has to be that way. If it makes you feel any better, there are some things I'm not telling them," said Harry, gesturing to his two friends.

"Really?" asked Ron, surprised.

"Some plans I'm working on with Kingsley," he explained. "If I talk to you about them—"

"And we get captured, you can't do them anymore," finished Hermione. "Don't worry, Harry, I understand. We don't take offense."

"Well, maybe a little," Ron deadpanned.

Harry chuckled. "Sorry. Getting back to what I was saying, we do the diadem, and the big question is, then what? It seems to me that we can't do Bellatrix's vault, and of course Nagini, until we know how to get the Horcrux out of Harry. And now we're back to you, Malfoy. You had a plan?"

"A tentative plan," clarified Malfoy. "There's information that I need to move forward, and that information is very hard to get. It would be better to do it sooner rather than later. Potter, I suspect you have some other Auror Leader abilities that you're not telling me about, and like you said, I don't like it, but I get why. But here, you may be able to do something that I couldn't do. So I'll tell you what I need, and we'll see what you can do to help."

Harry nodded. "Why is sooner better than later?"

"It has to do with Dumbledore. The time in which he can help us may be almost gone."

Harry's eyes narrowed in confusion. "What do you mean, help us? He's dead, so how can he help us? Something he left us?"

It was Malfoy's turn to look at Harry quizzically. "He's not dead, Potter."

"What??"

"I didn't kill him, remember?"

"Yeah, but the Horcrux, his hand! He didn't have much time left anyway! There's no way he could survive all this time!"

"Well, he has," said Malfoy.

Harry thought he noticed a small difference in Malfoy's manner when he spoke the last few words; there had to be a story behind that. "How?" he demanded.

"Well, now, you haven't been the most forthcoming with information yourself," Malfoy protested.

Harry sighed, getting annoyed. "That's for a very specific and good reason. Can you say the same?"

"In this case, no," admitted Malfoy. "But in some cases, it could be. And I have to tell you, all this secrecy is starting to wear on me. Maybe it's for a good reason, but we're in this together. It doesn't always matter whether there are good reasons or not. When your counterparts and I agreed to work together, it wasn't with the stipulation, 'you'll only be told exactly what you need to be told and no more.' I think you need to be a little more forthcoming."

"You're the one who was going off by himself, not telling our counterparts what you were doing," protested Hermione. "Where do you get off—"

"All right, all right," Malfoy conceded. "But that was only one thing, and for a very good reason. All I can tell you is I believe what I said, it's how I feel. I think I can do more, we can do more, if you tell me more."

"I understand," said Harry. "I promise I'll think about it carefully, back on the island. Now, are you going to tell us how it is Dumbledore is still alive?"

Malfoy paused, clearly uncomfortable. "Can I tell you without you going berserk on me?"

"Ooh, this can't be good," said Ron.

"We'll consider ourselves warned," said Harry, bracing for the worst.

Malfoy spoke only two words. "Unicorn blood."

Ron's mouth dropped open; Harry winced and looked down. "Unicorn blood?" screeched Hermione. "Are you insane? Do you know what that does to a person? How could you possibly do that??"

"Well, one out of three berserk, that's better than I expected," said Malfoy wryly. "If you'll calm down, Granger, I'll explain it."

"I am calm!" she shouted.

"Not really," said an amused Malfoy, who then turned serious as he looked at Harry. "Potter, your counterpart told me what happened with you and him when you went to get the Horcrux, the one that turned out to be empty. Dumbledore told him, and I assume you, to keep giving him that awful water, even though he'd soon be begging you not to. And you hated to do it, but you did it. That's what happened with you as well, right?"

Harry nodded somberly, pained at the memory. "Yes, that's right."

"Well, my story is a little like that. After I turned on the Death Eaters, while you were under your Cloak, you—your counterpart—helped me get him out of Hogwarts. He told you to get back to Hogwarts and help your friends, that I would take care of him. You protested, but he insisted, and finally you left.

"He had me take him to this shack, a tiny place that's well hidden, and we talked for a while. He asked if I knew of any Dark texts that had any information about Horcruxes. I said I wasn't sure, but I knew that my father had some very old, very valuable volumes hidden away. I told him that once, my father had mentioned the book, saying that they contained 'the darkest magics.'"

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Hermione. "That book is supposed to be the rarest of all Dark magic books. And the most dangerous, too, though it's so rare it's hard to know if that's just a legend."

"I'll tell you, and I told Dumbledore, that from the way my father said it, I wasn't sure if he meant that that was the title of the book, or that he just happened to use the phrase 'the darkest magics.' I doubt it was the second one, because I don't think he ever used the word 'magics,' just 'magic.' But I couldn't be certain.

"This got Dumbledore excited; he seemed to know a fair amount about the book. He said he was sure there was a chapter on Horcruxes, and it might give just the information we needed. He told me about the Dark Lord's Horcruxes, and the fact that Potter was one.

I couldn't believe it at first, but it started to make sense. The Parseltongue, the headaches, the prophecy...

"He said he'd always assumed that you had to die at the end of it, and he felt guilty for sending you out to do a job that would end with your death. He just didn't see any other way. But now, he had hope. He believes that the book will give instructions on how to extract a Horcrux from a living thing without killing that thing. And he thinks there may be one way, a way that required him to stay alive.

"He thinks it's very possible that there may be a spell, a technique, or something, that lets you pull a Horcrux out of one person provided it goes directly into another. He wanted to live long enough for it to be him the Horcrux went into. He would take it from you, die soon after, and the Horcrux would be dead."

"Oh, God," muttered Harry. Hermione was clearly on the verge of tears. Even Malfoy was clearly affected.

"It was Dumbledore who had the idea to keep him alive with unicorn blood. Not that he didn't know, but I told him that it would turn him into a monster, that it would make him darker than he ever thought he could be. He said he knew, but he said, 'After all that I've done with Harry, the mistakes I've made, I must do this for him. But, Draco, he must not know, until it is close to the time. He would not allow it, but I must do it. Please do this for me.'" Now, Harry could see tears trickling down Hermione's face; his own were threatening.

"Like I said, it was very similar to what happened with you and him, on the lake with the Inferi. He said that as time went by he would become unstable, even violent. I would have to take his wand, and refuse to give it back. He would beg to be released, or beg for death. But I must not do anything other than what he was telling me then, no matter what."

For the first time ever, Harry saw real emotion in Malfoy's eyes. "I'll be honest, Potter, it really hit me. I couldn't have imagined anyone doing such a thing. I wasn't raised to think that it was possible. Everyone looks out for himself, that's the way it is. For immediate family, maybe we do something, but nowhere close to that. It was like

a revelation. I decided to make it my mission to do what he was asking. Not for you—I didn't care whether you lived or died, except insofar as it affected what happened to the Dark Lord—but because it was what he wanted. He also pointed out that it would increase the chances of killing the Dark Lord, because you would live, and the prophecy says you'll defeat the Dark Lord, but how can you do that if you're dead?

"He told me where to go to find a unicorn, but still, it took a few days. I got as much blood as I could, brought it back, and..." Malfoy shrugged helplessly. "He's still alive, anyway." Harry cringed at the thought of Dumbledore's likely current condition.

"But somebody has to take care of him," said Hermione.

"Dobby," said Malfoy.

Makes sense, thought Harry. "I want to see him."

"No way," answered Malfoy quickly. "He specifically said that he didn't want you to see him like that."

"That was the other me, not this one," argued Harry.

"You're splitting hairs," said Malfoy. "He wouldn't want it. You know that."

"He also didn't want me to know this," Harry pointed out. "But you've told me."

"This you, not the other you," said Malfoy with a crooked grin, acknowledging the inconsistency of this statement with his previous one, but standing by it nevertheless. "This you has power the other one doesn't. And, you're not quite as stupid as him."

Harry grinned. "Ah, yes, I was warned when I became Auror Leader that people would be buttering me up."

Malfoy chuckled. “Whatever, you get the point. Now, I think, and I emphasize that I think, the books are in a secret compartment in a room in the basement of Malfoy Manor. I should explain that except for one small area, all of Malfoy Manor is immune to Apparition. I observed it from a distance a few times recently, and it’s being used as a base of operations for some Death Eaters.” Harry almost reflexively asked about Malfoy’s family, before remembering not to. “So, there’s no way I could get in there. How about you?”

Harry nodded. “I can Apparate into places that are immune to Apparition, and I can take a person with me.” Malfoy’s eyebrows went high. “We come in under my Cloak, and we Stun anyone in the basement. Should be no problem.”

“You can’t Apparate there. You’ve never been there.”

“Actually, I have.”

Malfoy was again surprised, but didn’t inquire further. “When do we do it?”

“Next switch, or maybe the one after that.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t have forever.”

“I know, and it’ll probably be the next one. Unless you’re sure that it can be done in under an hour, we can’t do it now, because we only get one shot. We have to be done—“

“Before the other Potter gets back, I know. All right, next time. But let’s plan it out now, so unless something changes, we can do it as soon as you get here next time. We want to leave as much time as possible.”

“Agreed.”

An hour later, Harry Apparated to the place he’d been told to. He’d never been there, so he hadn’t arrived at the precise spot, but he could see that it was close enough. It was at the bottom of a steep hill. At first it looked as though there were just a lot of trees in one area at

the base of the hill, but closer inspection revealed that, as he'd been told, there was an indentation in the hill, and the trees served to cover up the entrance. A good place to hide, thought Harry.

He approached the entrance and used the Lumos spell as a powerful beam of light three times, then paused. Once, then a pause. Then four times, then one, then five. He waited.

He saw the barest hint of movement through the trees, then heard a voice. "Throw down your wand, two yards in front of you." Harry did so.

"Where should you never keep your wand?"

Harry paused, then chuckled as the memory came back to him. "In your back pocket, though Mad-Eye never actually knew anyone who lost a buttock."

Kingsley Shacklebolt emerged from the trees, wand pointed straight at Harry. He Summoned Harry's wand, catching it while eyeing Harry warily. "You look too old. It's only been a few months, but you look two years older."

"Yeah, well, for me it has been two years. Well, actually, more like one and a half."

"How's that?"

"Takes a bit to explain. Shouldn't we go inside?"

"I'll decide when we go inside. Now, how do you know about this place? I've told exactly nobody about this. Have you been following me?"

"Nope. I'm from—well, we're not totally sure about this, but I think I'm here from another dimension, a very similar one. The other Harry, the one that's native to this dimension, and I have been switching, along with over a dozen DA members. We don't know why, and we don't control it. It just happens. Our Kingsley isn't switching, and he told me

to contact you. He told me where to find you, and the right sequence of flashes to let you know it was a friend.”

Clearly taken aback, Kingsley paused. “That’s just weird enough to be true.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of how I feel.”

“Why are you here?”

“The short version is, we want your help. The long version, I don’t want to say out in the open here.” Harry almost asked for his wand back, but realized that Kingsley would give it to him when he was sure it was really Harry.

“All right, come in. Go first, and don’t get any closer than two meters to me.”

Harry moved as instructed. “Would it help if I told you that my aunt and uncle apparently have an immaculate lawn?”

Kingsley grunted. “I did kind of feel for you, growing up with them. But as you know, a Death Eater could have captured you and pulled all this from your mind.”

Harry moved through the trees into the open area, which was no larger than a large living room in a house, well covered by the trees. “How about my knowing this place, and the signal?”

“That’s why I’m showing you in. I’m close to convinced, but not there yet.”

Harry sat on the ground, his back to one of the ‘walls.’ “How about—“

“Harry. In this kind of situation, you don’t want to push too hard, considering that you’re the one surprising me in my hideout. Let me decide in my own time.”

“Okay, but just one more?”

Kingsley sighed. "Go ahead."

"Do Reveal Magic on my forehead."

It got the typical astonished reaction. "This can't be faked..." gasped Kingsley.

Harry shrugged. "If you say so. I didn't know that. I didn't have enough time to read up on all that stuff."

"How?"

Harry gave him the short version of that story, then more information about the dimension-switching. "I would tell you more, but I've already spent fifteen minutes of the thirty I have. I can't be here when I switch back, because my counterpart wouldn't know how to get back to the others."

"Like I said before, our Kingsley told me to contact you. Since things went differently in this timeline, or dimension, whatever, we can't do exactly what we did in my case. He hopes that you can provide support for us in some cases. Maybe extra people, loyal Aurors like Tonks and Hestia, maybe information, like how to get resources. In any case, he wanted you and me to have a channel of communication."

"Why don't you just take control of the Aurors?" asked Kingsley. "You're Auror Leader, it's your right."

"We thought of that. The problem is that the Harry Potter who'll be here in half an hour doesn't have anything on his forehead except a scar. If this keeps happening, that may be more possible. But the other problem is that it would scare the crap out of the Dark wizards, maybe provoke them to extreme measures. We have to be careful, move only when we're ready and know the consequences."

Kingsley stared at Harry. "You've grown up a lot."

"I guess. Having this kind of responsibility will do that."

“Yes. Well... tell my counterpart I’ll do as he asks. I’ll expect you back when you have something to ask or tell. Will I be seeing my Harry, or just you?”

“I’m not sure what our Kingsley is telling your Harry; they’re probably talking right now. I’ll let you know next time I see you.”

Kingsley chuckled. “My Harry, your Kingsley. The universe is a funny place sometimes.”

“Sure does seem that way,” agreed Harry. “See you ‘round.”

* * * * *

At Hogwarts, soon after the switch, Luna was eating dinner by herself in the Great Hall. She’d thought about eating with Terry and Padma, but she knew it would look suspicious, or at least would draw unwanted questions, since she’d never had any connection to them in the past. In any case, they wouldn’t be able to talk at the table about the thing they had in common.

She didn’t mind eating alone, though, because she didn’t feel like chatting with anyone. Too many disturbing thoughts were intruding on her usually Zen-like calm.

For the hundredth time since Kingsley had come back from Australia and India with the theory of the switching being dimension-based rather than time-based, she wondered if she was responsible. All the wondering in the world wouldn’t change what had happened, but she couldn’t stop it; it was as if some outside force had taken control of her mind and imposed these thoughts on her. It had taken all of her effort to appear normal to the others on the island.

Why didn’t I tell them on the island, she asked herself. I had every opportunity, and a half dozen times I nearly went to Harry’s tent. But I just couldn’t. I pride myself on not lying, but this is a lie of omission. It’s a lie just the same.

She went over the justifications again: it was far from definite that these switches were between dimensions, and even if they were, it

was far from definite that her actions had caused them. And even if they had, what was to be gained from telling anyone?

Rationalizations, she told herself. Like Kingsley said, you can convince yourself of anything if you try hard enough. You can explain away anything. She knew what the right thing to do was, but she hadn't been able to look Harry in the eye and tell him what she needed to tell him. That was her failure.

After dinner, she walked to the library. There was no point in studying, of course, but she looked for any books she could find on the topic of multiple dimensions and other space-time speculations. She found a few, but there was little or no solid information in them. Terry and Padma have probably already checked them, she thought. Still, the looking made her feel as though she was doing something.

She decided to walk in the general direction of the Room of Requirement to see if Neville had set it up yet. Most of the way there, she turned a corner and was suddenly face to face with Professor Carrow, though it was hard for her to think of him as a real professor. He raised his eyebrows, as if delighted at having made an unexpected discovery.

"Professor," she said politely, and started to walk on.

He quickly shifted his position to block her. "Miss Lovegood. Where, pray tell, are you headed?"

It suddenly dawned on her that there was no place that she could reasonably claim to have been going; so preoccupied had she been with her self-castigation that she'd neglected to construct a plausible explanation if discovered. "Just taking a walk."

"An odd place for a walk, don't you think?" he responded with a smile that was far from friendly.

"Maybe," she acknowledged. "But I like to see all parts of the school. For example, on the third floor near the Astronomy Tower, there's—"

“I am familiar with the school, Miss Lovegood,” he retorted, still smiling. “Another thing I am familiar with is how it appears when someone is lying to me. You will accompany me to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.”

A chill went down her spine as she followed him. Would she be tortured? It didn't tend to happen to girls, so she didn't think so. But then, what? She tried to keep calm as she walked. Along the way, Carrow shot something from his wand, a bolt of energy that went down the hall and curved around a corner, out of sight.

In three minutes they were in the classroom. “Take a seat,” he instructed her. She sat down in the second row from the front. He sat and read from a book, seeming to take no notice of her.

A few minutes later, his sister opened the door; he walked over and stepped out of the room, closing the door. She tried to listen, but could hear nothing through the door. She considered getting nearer the door to listen, but decided it would be too risky. A minute later, he came back in.

“So, Miss Lovegood. Why did you lie to me before?”

“I wasn't lying, sir.”

He chuckled and shook his head as if disappointed. “Miss Lovegood, you are not a very good liar. You must not have had enough practice.” He sat and continued reading his book, saying nothing more.

Over the next hour and a half, absolutely nothing happened, except for her requesting and being granted a trip to the restroom (“If you take more than three minutes, I will come looking for you, and you do not want that”). Uncomfortably, she realized that it wouldn't be too long before the switch would happen, and the ‘real’ Luna of this dimension would find herself sitting in the classroom, not knowing why she was there. Unfortunately, there was nothing to be done about that.

The door opened, and Alecko Carrow entered, with a book in her hand. She put it on the desk in front of Luna as she exchanged a few words with her brother, then left.

After another minute, Carrow looked up from his book. "Miss Lovegood, you can go. But first, hand me that book that my sister just brought."

Greatly relieved that she was to be released before the switch—it had to be no more than a matter of minutes by now—she hastened to stand and do as he asked. Taking two steps forward, she reached out, picked up the book, and the world suddenly started spinning.

She found herself in a place that was dreadfully familiar: the dungeon in Malfoy Manor, where she'd spent so many days the year before. She'd barely had time to register this before three men grabbed her, pushing her hands behind her back and tying them together magically. Two men held her by the arms, while one stood in front of her. He was wiry and short, barely an inch taller than her, with slicked-back black hair and a weak chin. Dread filled her as she remembered who he was.

"Get her robe off," he instructed the other two with a smile. "It's warm down here, and we wouldn't want her to be uncomfortable." In a few seconds, her school robes were off; she was wearing only a thin shirt and a skirt. He looked her up and down, grinning. "Not bad, not bad at all. You'll be our guest here, young lady, for a while. How long that will be is up to your father. But in the meantime, there's no reason why we shouldn't enjoy ourselves."

Terrified, she said nothing as he unabashedly stared at her chest. She suddenly realized that the top two buttons of her shirt were unbuttoned, which she often did when she wore robes. Seemingly having noticed this, the man reached out to pull her forward by her shoulder to cause her to have to bend down somewhat. Looking down the front of her shirt, he whispered, "Oh, very nice, very nice indeed—"

In an instant, Luna was sitting at the main table, back on the island. "No!" she shouted, her face contorting in despair. "No no no no no no

no no NO!!” The last utterance stretched out into a half-scream, half-wail.

Alarmed, everyone else at the table looked at her as she stood and staggered away from the table. “Luna, what is it?” asked Cho. Making noises that became less and less coherent, she headed for the tents without looking back.

Harry looked at the others in amazement. “Does anyone know...?” From their faces, he understood that no one did. He stood and walked briskly to her tent.

He entered without knocking, finding her on the edge of her bed, sobbing. Without thinking about it, remembering the last time he’d been with her when she was crying, he sat next to her and put an arm around her shoulders, pulled her closer to him, and held her. She sobbed into his chest. He wondered what had happened, but knew she had to get this out of her system first.

Finally, a few minutes later, the sobbing started to slow down. “It’s all my fault,” she whimpered between tears. “It’s all my fault.”

“What’s all your fault, Luna?” he asked gently. “What happened?”

“I... she... was taken. The... Carrows, set up a Portkey, made me take it, back to Malfoy Manor. But it’s all my fault! The switching is all my fault! I’m so sorry...” She started to cry again.

Befuddled, he asked, “Why is the switching your fault?”

Slowly, she explained how she visited the twin dimension; Harry suddenly remembered a detail from the visions he’d had during the trial he’d undergone after leaving Japan a few months ago. When her father had met her mother, she’d told him that she visited the twin dimension to see Snorkacks.

“I started doing it maybe a month ago or more, around the time George left... and that’s not too far from when this all started,” she said, looking down, Harry’s arm still around her shoulders. Now she looked up into his eyes, as if beseeching him to understand. “I never

thought anything would happen, it never even entered my mind. Even after the switching started, I didn't think it was me, because we thought it was going back in time. But after what the man from India said, I suddenly realized, it must have been me... Oh, Harry..." She buried her head in his chest again, and clung to him. "I'm so sorry."

He held her tightly. "We don't know that's the reason."

"It must be," she said, her voice muffled.

"But then why not only you? And why not Kingsley and Hestia, for that matter?" She shook her head, but said nothing.

He didn't want to ask, but knew he should. "Why were you so upset when you came back? I mean, it's very bad, what happened, but you were there before, right?"

She took a deep breath. "There was a man, who was... looking at me, at my body, in... you know, that way..." Harry cringed slightly, and waited for her to continue. "He had been there a few times when I was at Malfoy Manor, looking at me like that. But, one time..."

"Draco would come down sometimes, to give me food, that sort of thing. He... didn't exactly apologize, not with words, but his manner said it. He said it wasn't his idea to keep me there, and I knew that. This man, the one who was looking at me when I left just now, he was there before, looking at me the same way. He made some comments, saying what he'd like to do to me if he was alone with me. Draco told him he'd better not, said that the Dark Lord had ordered that I wasn't to be touched like that, and the man would risk the Dark Lord's anger if he did it. The man looked as if he didn't believe Draco, but didn't want to take the chance that Draco might be telling the truth. He never touched me."

She looked up at him. Harry took his hand off her shoulder, and held her hand. "Harry... there's no way Voldemort gave any such order. He wouldn't have bothered. Draco did that, took that risk, to protect me from that... well, this time, Draco isn't there. There's nothing to stop that man from doing whatever he wants."

He could see the pain in her eyes at the prospect. Again, he didn't want to ask, but felt like he had to have all the information. "Had he done anything, when you switched?"

She closed her eyes. "He hadn't yet, but he'd taken off... my robe, and... the way he was looking at me... I really think he was going to. And she... the other me, switched back in... all of a sudden there she is, with this man..." She bowed her head in sorrow and shame.

"Luna..." Helplessly, not knowing what to say, he stumbled on. "Not that this is going to make you feel better, but that was going to happen anyway. They just took you from the school instead of off the train. And Draco wasn't going to be there this time... really, this wasn't your fault."

"It is... I should have known better, you even said, be careful about anything to do with space/time... I was stupid..."

"But, Luna, whatever's happening with her now, like I said, that was going to happen anyway. And the difference is a good one, because we can get you, her, out of there. And we will." He gently nudged her head with his hand, and looked her in the eyes. "I swear to God, we're going to get you out of there. That's the first thing we do when we go back."

She met his eyes, then looked down again. "I feel like fate is punishing me."

"Why?"

"I... I said, that morning, a month ago... that you and I could never be together, because of what you did, that day... it was arrogant of me," she said bitterly. "Now, here I've done something terrible, something careless, that's caused so much trouble, and you've been so kind... you were good to George, when he was having his problems... I... can't imagine why I would have said that. It just seems so ironic now, that I should have been judging you."

He found that he couldn't disagree with her, but he knew that he would never say such a thing. "You just said what you thought. You

shouldn't worry about that, either. We'll get you out of there, and... we'll deal with the situation over there as best we can. Who knows, it may end up better with our intervention than it would have otherwise." She looked up at him with gratitude. I sure hope I'm right about that, he thought.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 9, Malfoy Manor: The use of a magical pendant given to Harry by Dumbledore causes a sharp and unexpected turn in Harry's life as plans are made to break Luna out of Malfoy Manor.

From Chapter 9: "Ginny's never going to agree to stay one minute here," said Ron to no one in particular. "After what Lucius Malfoy—"

"Ron!" Harry nearly shouted, glaring at his friend. "As Auror Leader, I'm ordering you not to say another word!"

Chapter 9

Malfoy Manor

Harry spent some time that evening with Kingsley, gaming out tactics that might need to be used in extricating Luna from her captivity. He told Ginny, who was sharing a tent with Luna, to tell Luna that she should feel free to get up whenever she wanted and not worry about preparing breakfast. Luna, however, got up at her usual time. She looked to Harry as though she hadn't gotten much sleep.

Unable to face the others, Luna had asked Harry after their conversation to tell the others what had happened, and why she felt she was responsible for their predicament. The next morning, he was gratified to see that several people gave her expressions of support, and no one acted in any way unhappy with her. If they were going to blame her, at least they weren't going to do it now.

They spent the morning on dueling and close-quarters fighting scenarios, which Harry expected to have to use soon after the next switch. After lunch, he went to his tent for a break, and soon there was a knock on the door. He opened it with his wand, and to his surprise, it was Ginny.

"Hi," he said. "Come on in." He gestured her to sit on the sofa; he took the chair that was kitty-corner from it. "Was she okay last night? It looked as though she didn't get much sleep."

"It looked that way to me, too," she agreed. "She only talked a little last night, and of course, I wasn't about to press her. I tried to reassure her, but what can you say?" She sighed, then continued. "The bad part is, she did make a mistake. We all know, we all knew when we were at Hogwarts, that you don't just wander over to the Room of Requirement. You do it very carefully, you set up lookouts, and you prepare a plausible reason for why you are wherever you are. So when she blames herself, she's not 100% wrong."

"I know," agreed Harry. "But I do think that was going to happen anyway, and we all make mistakes. So, is that what you came to talk about?"

“Um, no,” she said hesitantly. “And I have to say, with what’s going on, it seems trivial, but... my counterpart left me a note.” She took it out of her pocket and read. “If this is another dimension and not our future, then please let me know what’s going on with you and your Harry. As you probably know, I have no idea what he’s thinking, whether he wants me, cares about me, or not. I know that bigger things are going on with him, but you know how important this is to me. Please tell me what you can.” She gave him an expression that conveyed that she was uncomfortable telling him this, but felt she should.

He leaned back in his chair and looked up. “Wow. That’s... not an easy one, is it.”

“No. I’m not sure what to say. I’m afraid that if I tell her what happened, she’ll give up on that Harry. But I’m not even sure if she should.”

Harry nodded. “Because what happened that pushed you and me apart is probably unique to this timeline. I remember after I got back from Japan, you asked me if that hadn’t happened, that weird mental place I was in, would we have gotten together, and I said I wasn’t sure. This is, more or less, asking that same question.”

She was somber. “Harry... well, before I say this, I want to say that I love Neville, and even if you said you wanted me now, I’d say no thanks, I’m happy how I am. But when you said that, that you weren’t sure what you would have done... to be honest, I felt as though... not that you were lying exactly, but that you said that because you had to say that. If you said you wouldn’t have wanted me, that’s like rejection, and it would hurt me even though I was with someone else. But if you said you would want me back, that’s also bad, because it would seem like you were after me even though I was with someone else, your friend. So, the safe thing to do is say you’re not sure. And you can say it’s the truth, because you’re honestly not 100% sure. But it’s probably more than fifty-fifty. It could be ninety-ten one way or the other, but you just say you’re not sure.”

Harry tried to keep a neutral expression, but was impressed at her insight; he hadn't thought about it like that, but he knew she was almost certainly right. He felt as though he'd been caught doing something wrong.

She continued. "I would've just let it go, because in the end it doesn't matter; what happened happened. But now there's this, and it matters, because I know how important this is to her. So... keeping in mind that I don't plan on telling Neville any of this, and it's not going to change anything between you and me... I'd really appreciate it if you'd give me your honest best guess about what would have happened if you hadn't had that experience where you almost died, and had to separate yourself from everything emotionally. Would you have tried to start things up with me again? Fifty-fifty, ninety-ten..."

Harry found he didn't have to think about it long, as he had considered the question at the time. "Eighty to ninety percent that I would have tried."

She slowly nodded. "I thought that might be the case. Thank you for telling me that. And... I'm sorry I couldn't wait. If I'd known that, I probably would have."

"I still loved you, for that year," he said quietly.

"Why didn't you take me with you? With Ron and Hermione, looking for the Horcruxes?" Her tone told him that it was a question that had long tormented her.

He had to think for a bit. "I just... I couldn't face it, that you'd be subjected to any danger. I know you wanted to... it's the same reason I tried to stop you fighting at the Hogwarts battle. I just couldn't risk anything happening to you."

"You could risk Ron and Hermione, though. And they could risk it with each other. So, why not me?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, I couldn't say. Maybe because I'd already been in situations like that with them—"

“I seem to recall going to the Department of Mysteries—“

“I know, I’m just thinking out loud. Maybe I’m just not as strong as them in this way. They could risk it, but I couldn’t.”

“I felt as though you didn’t think I had it in me to do that, that I wasn’t competent enough. That I would screw it up somehow. That you didn’t respect me enough, that I wasn’t Ron or Hermione’s equal.” Harry understood that she was unburdening herself of long-held feelings.

“Believe me, it wasn’t any of those things,” he said earnestly. “If it was anything, it was my fear of something happening.” As he said it, he realized that he was lying to some extent; the part about not being Ron or Hermione’s equal had hit home, and he knew there was some truth in that. Though she’d been his girlfriend, it hadn’t been for a very long time, and he felt a closeness with them that he hadn’t with her. He knew that she was asking for honesty, and he should say it, but he didn’t.

“Well,” she said, “not that it matters anyway, but as long as we’re talking about this, I really wanted to know that. Back to this... what do you think I should say to her?”

It was a difficult question. “I’m not sure... his situation is going to be pretty different from mine, and who knows what could happen. I guess I’d say... if you think you can wait, don’t give up on him. But he’s going through a lot, and there’s only so much he can handle. Once his life settles down, and Voldemort is gone, it’s very possible. Nothing is certain, but... his feelings for you haven’t changed. Just his life circumstances have.” He shrugged, indicating that this was the best he could do. Another thought came to him. “Who knows, she might be happier with Neville.”

She frowned. “You shouldn’t say that.”

“Why not? Couldn’t it be true?”

“As she is right now, she’s in love with you. Not Neville.”

“But Neville, their Neville, probably loves her, too.”

She sighed. “I know. But I’m going to answer her question based on what she’s thinking, not from my experiences after the fact. And just because I fell in love with Neville when I did doesn’t mean that I wouldn’t have been equally happy with you, if that was the way it happened. You shouldn’t put yourself down like that.”

“I didn’t think I was. But anyway, I understand.”

There was a short silence. “Well, I should be going,” she said. “But... thank you for being honest. I appreciate it.”

“Sure.”

* * * * *

After a few hours of practice, Harry called a halt, and everyone sat at the main table, including Luna and Cho. “Okay,” he said, “this is to talk about what we’re going to do over there, making plans for the future. I want everyone’s input on this.

“Obviously, the first thing to do when we get there is get Luna the hell out of there,” he went on, with a glance at her. “Probably it’ll be me and Malfoy going in.”

Many were surprised. “Why Malfoy?” asked Seamus.

“He knows the place,” explained Harry. “Also, by fortunate happenstance, we need to go there anyway.” He told them what Malfoy had said about the Dark texts they would be looking for.

“Harry,” said Luna, “I think the place you need to go for those may be different from the room I’ll be in. I’m not sure, though.”

“Malfoy will have to tell me about that. Maybe they have more than one basement, but that’s the only one I know. So, I’ll have to go there first, at least.

“Now, the point I was getting to was that there may be bad guys in that room. I’m pretty confident that I can take whoever’s there. If there are, like, more than five, we’re in trouble, but the chance has to be taken—”

“What about using the Cloak?” asked Ron.

“I thought about that,” said Harry, “but you can’t shoot spells through it. They’ll hear the Apparition sound, so they’ll know we’re there. If they hear that, but can’t see anything, we have to assume they’ll call for backup, whoever may be in the house. We have to assume there’ll be people in the room. We’ll have to take them by surprise, knock them out, and hopefully before they can sound a warning. The question is, then what? I don’t fancy leaving them there, to spread the news that Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy Apparated into a room that’s supposed to be immune from Apparition.”

“You could wear masks, cover your faces,” suggested Corner.

“While Luna sits there, who knows what happening to her, while Harry and Malfoy try to get masks together?” said Ginny accusingly.

Corner reacted as if he’d been slapped. “Hey, I’m just throwing ideas out there. No need to get like that. I don’t want anything to happen to her—”

“All right, all right,” conceded Ginny. “Sorry.”

“I want to hear all ideas,” emphasized Harry. “We’ll evaluate them after we hear them, but don’t hesitate to mention anything, even if it seems unworkable. Someone might think of a way to make it work. In this case, it does seem as though Ginny’s right, there won’t be time for that. We go get Luna as soon as humanly possible. So anyway, I don’t want to leave them there, and to me the best solution is to take them with us.

“Which leads to the question of what to do with them. One possibility is to create some kind of hideout that also functions as a jail. And then, we have to ask, what would that be? A Muggle house? Should we try to reclaim Grimmauld Place, use that as a hideout? How risky

would that be? There are all kinds of possibilities, and I want to hear ideas about that.

“Another possibility is using the same kind of suspended animation thing that Kingsley used on me a month ago. Kingsley tells me that they’re expensive, but obtainable on the black market, as are various things, supplies we might need. Malfoy told me that there’s a man whose business it is to procure things for people who are on the run from the law, or don’t want what they acquire to be known for whatever reason—“

Kingsley interrupted. “The man’s name is Kitterman, Angus Kitterman. He’s well known to Aurors, of course.”

“Ah. Malfoy said something about him being called ‘the Kitten.’”

“He doesn’t like that nickname,” said Kingsley, deadpan.

“I can see why not,” agreed Harry. “Anyway, obviously, we can’t be seen going into shops, things like that. He could get us supplies, almost anything we’d need, but it would be expensive, at least double the ordinary price of these items.”

“That must be really profitable,” mused Lee. “I’m surprised there aren’t more people in the business, with that profit margin.”

“There are,” said Kingsley, “but he’s the best. He has the right contacts, and he spreads the money around to make sure the people he gets things from stay quiet. He’s not rich, because there isn’t a huge amount of call for his services, but it’s well known that he’s the man to call if you need that sort of thing.”

“Why didn’t the Aurors ever arrest him, if they knew about it?” wondered Lee.

“Strictly speaking, a lot of what he does isn’t illegal,” said Kingsley. “He’s just in the business of buying and selling. Occasionally he deals in restricted or illegal items, and for that, he charges more, and is more careful. He’s hard to catch, hard to get evidence on.”

“Malfoy told me,” said Harry, “that the ‘hotter’ you are, as he put it, the more he charges. Malfoy said that we were so hot he might not even do business with us, and if he did, it would be at no less than a 200% markup. Which means, we need money.”

“But you have tons of money,” pointed out Padma. “Three million Galleons, not in Gringotts. So, where is it?”

“It’s in Grimmauld Place, which is another reason it might be good to go there. Now, last year, Hermione and I decided not to try to summon Kreacher because he might unwillingly take a Death Eater with him, or his loyalty might have changed again, and we didn’t want to risk—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” interrupted George. “I’d wondered about that. I know the bit about Yaxley ending up in Grimmauld Place, but... Kreacher has to do what you say! You gave him orders before, and relied on him to do things even when he didn’t want to follow you. Were you really afraid that if you summoned him, he was going to find the nearest Death Eater and drag him along? And wouldn’t the tiny risk of that been worth the immense amount of help he could have been to you?”

Harry exchanged an unhappy glance with Hermione. “Well, in retrospect, it turns out that you would have been right. We learned later that Kreacher got Yaxley out of there right away, and the house would’ve been safe for us. But considering the precarious situation we were in, we decided to err on the side of caution.”

George’s dubious expression suggested that he thought that Harry and Hermione had been overly cautious to the point of absurdity. “But your situation would have been a lot less precarious if you’d—”

“George,” said Kingsley. “That’s in the past, okay? Let’s focus on the here and now.”

“Wait a minute,” said George. “I’m not trying to hassle Harry and Hermione here, but I think this is important. I don’t think this is just a matter of judgment, I think this was a mistake, that the risk versus reward assessment was way, way off, and if I think the person who’s

giving me orders made what I think is a glaring mistake, then I'd like to be told why it wasn't a mistake, or to know that he knows it's a mistake, and has learned from it. I don't think this is unreasonable."

There was silence as everyone looked at Harry to see how he would respond. Wondering how to handle it, he turned to Ron. "You weren't a party to that decision, Ron. What did you think of it?"

Ron gave Harry a look that said, do you really want an honest answer? "I thought it was strange, too, but I wasn't inclined to argue with the two of you about it. Really, I didn't think it through that much. But sitting here now, looking at it like that, it's hard to argue with George."

"Kingsley?"

Kingsley nodded. "I think George is right. Even if he had brought someone, you could have Stunned them, three against one. If I'd been with you, I'd have told you to do it, absolutely."

Harry nodded. "I suppose you're right. Well, all I can say is that I've had a lot more practice making decisions since then, and I do try to weigh everything pretty carefully. That decision was made on the idea that even a tiny risk wasn't worth taking, which is ironic considering the risks we took later—"

"Hang on," interrupted Hermione, somewhat agitated. "First of all, Harry's trying to take responsibility, but this was basically my idea. Secondly, I agree that it was too cautious, but you have to remember that Kreacher's loyalty had been in real question for quite a while, and he had just been starting to come around. Now, he probably would have been loyal, but he could also be mercurial, and it would have been taking a chance. He could have been tricked, he could have made a mistake to betray us. Yes, I concede that it was overly cautious, and it was a mistake not to consider it more carefully. But it wasn't ridiculous. To really evaluate that, you have to know Kreacher's character and moods, and only the three of us knew that. So before you judge us, you have to know that." She defiantly looked around the table, silently daring anyone to argue with her.

George spoke again, but not to argue. “Well, you both admitted it was a mistake, so I’m okay. If you’d tried to defend it as the right thing to do, then I’d be pretty concerned. But, let’s go on.”

Kingsley spoke before Harry could. “I do want to say, and I had planned to talk about this at some point, that it’s a very human characteristic to defend one’s actions, not only before the fact, but also after the fact even when it’s clear that the actions were mistakes. No one likes to admit they were wrong, so people often devise elaborate explanations and scenarios in retrospect, sometimes ludicrous ones, in order to not have to admit they were wrong. I say this because as Aurors, not recognizing mistakes is a very dangerous thing. You can’t let your pride get wrapped up in defending your position. Hermione, it’s very reasonable to point out in this case things you knew that others didn’t know when judging you. But what you want to watch out for is getting upset, getting defensive. Be as analytical as possible. It doesn’t matter that you—not you, but anybody—weren’t right last time. What matters is that you’re right this time, next time. That, as George said, you learned from it. Okay, lecture over. Harry, you were saying, about calling Kreacher in the other dimension.”

He’d almost forgotten what he’d been talking about. “Yes, thanks. I was saying that we hadn’t called Kreacher last time, but things might be different this time. The Yaxley thing might have happened differently, since it happened after the point where the two dimensions split, when Malfoy made his choice not to kill Dumbledore. So, it could’ve happened differently. But on the other hand, our counterparts aren’t hiding out in Grimmauld Place, so it may have happened the same way. I’m going to leave a note for the other Harry, asking him what happened with that. But I’m also going to try to call Kreacher next time, after we rescue Luna. Our lives would be a whole lot easier if we got that house, and the money.”

“If Dark wizards have the house,” asked Parvati, “do they also have the money?”

“Only I can access it, fortunately. They won’t even know it’s there, unless Kreacher tells them, which isn’t impossible. Still, they couldn’t get to it, I’m sure.

“If that’s impossible, then the only other choice would be my Gringotts vault, which I could Apparate into. The problem with that is that it might set off alarms, and it’s hard to say how much money I’d be able to throw into a bag before they’d get into my vault. But it would be worth considering.”

“Could you just walk in the front door?” asked Terry. “Wearing a cloak or something to hide your face? Would they have any reason to deny you access to your money?”

Harry looked at Kingsley. “Harry would be considered a criminal suspect by the Thicknesse government, and the goblins would be expected to alert the authorities if they come in contact with such a person. It’s possible they might not, however. The extent to which the Gringotts goblins cooperate with the Ministry in such matters depends on how relations are between the parties at any given time. I’d judge it too big a risk—not that they’d capture Harry, but that it would get the government on its toes. I’d prefer Apparating into the vault, but before that, try Kreacher.”

“Okay,” agreed Harry. “Now, over the next day, I want people to think about things they can do to help out, strategy ideas. How to get things, what things to get, what to do with prisoners, what should be done at Hogwarts. Any questions or comments?”

“Yeah, one thing,” said Neville. “Something that Luna’s situation called attention to, and that would make our lives at Hogwarts much easier...”

At Hermione’s suggestion, there were no more group exercises until the next switch; each person focused on activities that they thought they would need in the near future on the other side. Harry practiced advanced Apparition, testing the limits of his abilities. For it to be a realistic test, unfortunately, he had to use another’s wand—he chose Kingsley’s—because he wouldn’t have access to the Elder wand in the other dimension.

He found that he was able to accompany two others by Apparition under normal circumstances. When faced with Kingsley’s anti-

Disapparation field, he and another person could Apparate, but he and two others were Splinched half of the time. He also tested how often he could Apparate; it was normally recommended that a wizard not try to Apparate more often than once every two minutes, and Kingsley had told him that for the average Auror, trying to Apparate twice in fifteen seconds resulted in Splinching about 25% of the time, up to 50% if trying to accompany another by Side-Along Apparition. Even with Kingsley's wand, Harry was able to do better, and he knew he could do even better with his 'old' wand, the one he'd used at Hogwarts for seven years before getting the Elder wand. He felt good about the practice, and was confident that he knew the extent of his abilities.

Others were practicing different activities, or exchanging ideas. He saw George, Lee, Angelina, and Cho talking together at one point, and realized that it was because they were the only non-Muggle-borns no longer attending Hogwarts. They would be able to do things together and not fall under suspicion, though George would have to be somewhat careful; as a Weasley, he would come under greater observation by the government.

Hermione and Dean were currently paired up in the tents, and Harry saw them together for much of the day, but he didn't know what they were practicing. Shortly before dinner, he found out.

George had spent the last half hour with them, and the three of them approached the others at the dinner table. "This is what we have been working on today," explained Hermione. "He'll demonstrate."

"George," said Dean, "what do you think of Ginny?"

"I don't know. She's my sister, I like her fine. Why?"

"What do you think of Ron?"

George answered immediately. "Ron is brilliant, the greatest genius in wizarding history. He's my brother, and I love him very much." George looked at Dean and Hermione accusingly. "Hey! I didn't know you were going to have me say that!"

There was some laughter as Hermione explained. Gesturing to Dean, she said, "The two of us were talking last night, and it turned out we'd both read a book they have in the library about magical hypnosis. In the wizarding world, it's not much more than a parlor trick, to amuse your friends, because the subject can cancel it with his wand at any time. But we realized it could be of great use to us, in a way that it never could be for most wizards, because of our familiarity with the Muggle world."

"George kindly volunteered to be our test subject. We hypnotized him in such a way that he says a particular phrase whenever he hears a certain word. So, for example, when he hears the word 'Ron,' he—"

"Ron is brilliant, the greatest genius in wizarding history. He's my brother, and I love him very much."

"He has to say that, he can't stop himself. George, what do you think of your younger brother?"

"He's a git."

This got some laughter. "That's really what you think of Ron?"

"Ron is brilliant, the greatest genius in wizarding history. He's my brother, and I love him very much." Annoyed, he added, "That's going to get a bit tiresome."

Hermione smiled. "So anyway, Dean and I—"

George spoke immediately. "Dean has a very large willie, much bigger than mine. I saw it in the shower once."

The table exploded in laughter, which even George joined in. "All right, that's enough," he said, advancing on Dean and taking his wand, which Dean had been holding. "Any ridiculous thing I say from this point forward will be of my own free will," he announced.

"Your own free willie, you mean," put in Lee, to more laughter.

"That one was Dean," said Hermione, smiling. "I had nothing to do with that."

Harry took a deep breath, having laughed a lot, like most others. "Well, that's pretty funny, but how are you going to make practical use out of it?"

Hermione took a few minutes to explain. When she finished, Harry found that he was impressed. "Wow, that's very good. I was Muggle-raised, but I would have never thought of that. Justin, what do you think?"

"Me neither," he agreed. "But yes, I think it should work. And I really want to be around when it happens."

"Sorry," said Dean, "It'll be just me and Hermione. But we'll put the memory in the Pensieve when we get back."

Harry was glad that even in dire circumstances, humor could be found. But he had noticed that while she had also laughed, the one who had laughed least was Luna. The thought sobered him up quite a bit. There was still a lot of work to do.

* * * * *

A few hours after dinner, Harry knocked on the door of the tent currently housing Ginny and Luna. The door swung open, and Harry entered; Luna was lying on her bed, but not in her nightclothes; on her side of the room, Ginny was sitting on the bed reading. "Hi, Harry," she said. "What's up?"

"I wanted to talk to Luna," he said. "Luna, could you come to my tent?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, I'll leave. I was thinking of asking Neville to take a walk anyway." She stood up and left.

Harry decided to walk over and sit on the bed, at the end. As he spoke, Luna slowly sat up. "How are you doing?"

She tilted her head lightly. "Not very good. I still feel really guilty."

"I know this may not help, but what I said before was right. This was going to happen anyway."

She met his eyes, and it pained him to see the sadness in hers. "Do you think that'll make her feel any better?"

He glanced down. "No, I suppose not. But that doesn't make it your fault."

"I came here because I want to talk about what we're going to do when we rescue you. I'm going to be carrying a Portkey in my left hand, and it'll activate with the next person it touches. I'll give it to you as soon as I can, depending on what resistance we meet when we get there, or it's possible that I might try to use it to get rid of an adversary, if necessary. If that happens, I'll just Apparate you out of there. If you're in a different room than the one the book is in, I'm going to get you first."

"How will you get from one room to the other?"

"Move through the house, under the Cloak. But I'll fight my way through if I have to."

"What if you only have time or opportunity to do one?"

"We get you, of course."

"Draco might not agree."

"Not his decision. He tries to stop me, I'll Stun him. But I don't think he'll do that. His counterpart, our Malfoy, seems to have a chivalrous streak."

She sighed lightly. "I'm sorry, I've put your mission in jeopardy. I should've just stayed in my dormitory."

He decided not to comment on that, and went on to the next item. "I've talked with Kingsley about the tactics of this operation, and one

thing we have to consider is the possibility that they'll move you. Not likely, but anything could happen. We were talking about what to do in that case, and I remembered something that Dumbledore gave me that should be helpful."

He reached into a pocket in his robe and took out a necklace with a thin silver chain and a silver medallion on the end. The medallion was in the shape of a circle, and depicted a full moon. He pointed his wand at it, and as he had several months ago, he heard Dumbledore's voice. "Under the same moon, always together even when apart."

Interested, she examined it more closely. "Who wears it?"

"We both do," he said. "Kingsley thinks that one of us puts it on, and it affects both of us, but he's not sure how. We'll both be wearing it, somehow or other. Once it's in effect, he's sure that it connects us in some way. He thinks it's communication; he said he saw a man in France who had something like that, and of course, magic exists to allow communication at a distance. It almost has to be something that'll be very useful to us. If they've moved you, you should be able to tell me where."

"But it's just our bodies that make the switch," she pointed out. "Not our clothes, or jewelry."

"Kingsley said there's something he can do to it, for both of us, that should solve that problem. There's a spell that makes an object a part of the person, part of their body. It usually has other applications, he said, but he's pretty sure that it'll cause the necklaces to make the switch with us. So, do you want to try it on, or should I?"

"Maybe you should," she suggested. "Dumbledore did give it to you, so it might be that you need to be the one to put it on first."

He nodded. "Sounds reasonable." He put it on, but nothing changed for him. He shrugged. "Nothing's happening."

"Try the wand on it."

“Good idea.” He touched his wand to it, and they heard Dumbledore’s voice again. “A lovers’ kiss seals the bond.”

Both sets of eyebrows rose. “Ah,” said Harry. “Didn’t expect that.”

“It makes sense, though,” she mused. “This is clearly intended for lovers, after all. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Surprised that she would ask, he met her eyes. “Of course. As long as you’re okay.”

She nodded. “It’s okay. I certainly never imagined that my first kiss would be in this kind of situation, though. I hope I’ll do all right.”

He smiled. “One thing I found about kissing is that it comes very naturally. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Okay, then,” she said, looking a little nervous; it struck him that he’d never seen her look even a little nervous. It occurred to him that if the woman in this situation were, say, Parvati or Angelina, kissing her would simply be something that had to be done for operational reasons. But now, while that was the main reason, that wasn’t all there was to it.

She sat up next to him, and they faced each other; he wondered if she felt as awkward as he did. He moved his face in slowly, to give her time to get ready, maybe back off if she didn’t want to right then. She moved closer. Finally, their lips touched, and kissed gently. They pulled away and looked at each other.

“Any change?” she asked.

He touched the necklace, and shook his head. “Nothing I can notice. Maybe we should try again.”

She nodded. “Okay.” They leaned in and kissed again, this time for a few seconds, but the intensity was similar to what it had been the first time. Not exactly a chaste kiss, but not that far from it. They separated again, and exchanged a look. Again, he gave a light shrug and shook his head.

"Hmmm," she said. "I'd wondered if it might be this, but... what Dumbledore's voice said was, a lovers' kiss." The emphasis she put on the word told Harry what she meant, and it made sense. He looked at her again, and he recalled how he had comforted her after he father died, how he respected her for her straightforwardness and truthfulness, how well she'd seemed to understand him in the letters they'd exchanged in the month after Voldemort's defeat. She had an innocence, but at the same time, a quiet strength. Now, as he looked into her eyes, he saw her emotions, and it amazed him that so much could be conveyed with no words. They communicated with their eyes: this kiss would be different, and not just because it had to be.

They moved forward more quickly this time, their lips meeting in the same way they had before, but this time it was just the beginning of the kiss. As if on their own, his arms went around her shoulders and back, and he felt her do the same with him. As it continued, slowly their mouths opened; when their tongues finally touched, Harry felt an electric thrill—partly from the exciting sensation, and partly because he knew that something had changed with the necklaces. Somehow, he could tell that she knew as well, even though she continued the kiss without any overt reaction.

The kiss slowly wound down, and their faces finally separated. They glanced down, and saw that she was now wearing the same necklace. His was in the shape of the crescent moon; while hers filled out the rest of the circle. His eyes met hers again, and they again exchanged information. Her eyes seemed to ask a question: was that what I thought it was?

He returned her look, naturally answering the question with his eyes, but impulsively decided to answer another way. He leaned in for another kiss, holding her face with both his hands; she returned the kiss energetically. This kiss was shorter and not quite as passionate as the last one, but more than passionate enough. He knew the message—this wasn't because I had to, it was because I wanted to—had been received. Had his feelings suddenly changed, or had latent feelings been pushed to the surface? He didn't know, and didn't care. It felt good. He felt good.

At the same time, they both smiled. “Well,” she said, “now I understand a lot better why people spend so much time kissing.”

He chuckled. “Yes, that felt really good.”

Still smiling, she looked at him, and he looked back. It continued for less than a minute, and while it felt like a long time to be silent, at the same time, it felt perfectly normal, and pleasant. She reached for his hand and took it; he gave hers a gentle squeeze and held it.

With her free hand, she reached for the moon that hung from her necklace. “Funny how this just sort of appeared there. And it’s also funny that it happens to be a moon.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because ‘Luna’ is Latin for ‘moon.’”

“Oh, yeah. Wow, that is appropriate. Funny, I hadn’t thought of that—”

“Oh, wow!” she exclaimed, excited, as she looked up.

“What is it?”

“I can see myself! Do me a favor, look to your left.” He did, and she let out another sound of amazement. “I can see that!”

“See what?”

“Look up,” she said. He started to move his head; she put her hands on his head and moved it back down. “No, I mean, just with your eyes. Don’t move your head.” He noticed in passing that she’d touched his head to move it back down, while in ordinary circumstances she probably would have told him what to do without touching him. A lot had changed.

He did as she asked, and suddenly saw what she was talking about; he could see his own face in the upper part of his field of vision. Clearly, she could see from his face that he’d seen what she was

talking about. "Okay, you can see it?" she confirmed. "Now, look at this." She turned her head to her right, and the view suddenly swung as well; now he was looking at the wall of the tent.

Awed, he looked down again, back at her. "We can see through each other's eyes..."

"It's very cool."

"It's extremely cool," he agreed. He looked up again, and saw his own face. It brought back a memory, one that felt both recent and very old.

"What is it?" she asked, looking concerned.

"What is what?"

"Your face. You suddenly looked as if something was bothering you."

He started to dismiss it. "It's..." He had planned to say 'it's nothing,' but then he saw her eyes. He saw that she wanted to know what was disturbing him, that she wanted to help him. Luna is different from most people, he reminded himself. She wants to know the truth.

"I suddenly had a memory, from the Auror Leader test. Part of the false memory the test gave me was that when I went to Hogwarts, I missed my parents' home, so they gave me this ring that caused me to, when I looked up, just like this, see the living room of my home, so I wouldn't be so homesick. Later in the test, when I knew, I thought, I was going to die, I took a last look at it. I didn't have to die then, of course, but after that, the view of the living room didn't go away, and that was how, in that part of the test, I saw the Death Eaters capture my parents, Sirius, and Ron and Hermione..."

She moved a little closer to him and put her arms around him. "I'm sorry. I can see why this would remind you of that. You have so many... wounds..."

He gratefully returned her hug, drawing comfort from it. "Well, usually, I don't think about that. I'll get used to this, and it won't make me think of that. This has a much better... association."

She smiled again. "Yes, it does. And thank you for telling me that. I do want to know things like that."

He wondered if she had known that he'd been about to dismiss it. "Yes, I know. And I appreciate it. Now this..." He gestured with his eyes, referring to the functionality of the necklaces. "Not only is this cool, but for what we're going to do tomorrow, very helpful. I'll know the situation immediately, and be able to make a plan, plan exactly how to attack them once we're there. Now I have to wonder, what other functionality is there with this? Kingsley thought there was communication, and we should try that out."

"We will, but... maybe tomorrow, not tonight. I know you can't stay long, you have things to do, to prepare. Tomorrow, we'll analyze this, figure out all it does. But right now... I just want to stay here, and enjoy this."

He smiled. "I can understand that. Okay, tomorrow morning, I'll go with you to gather the breakfast stuff, and we can practice it then. Then, we'll have Kingsley do the spell."

He stood, then she did as well. Their eyes met, and as if by unspoken agreement, they fell into a kiss very much like the one that had activated the necklaces' magic. They finally separated, and with a last look back, he left the tent. He walked back to his tent, a smile on his face all the way.

* * * * *

Harry was usually able to fall asleep by 11:00 p.m. or so, and he regularly awoke at sunrise, these days about 6:00 a.m. But tonight, he couldn't sleep. He understood the reason full well, but it didn't make any difference. Tomorrow's mission, always very important, had become even more so. The flip side of love, he knew, was worrying about the person you loved. That was part of the deal.

At a few minutes after midnight, he decided to step out of his tent and enjoy the night air, something he'd done occasionally when he

couldn't sleep. He conjured a simple, soft chair in which he could lean back and look up at the sky.

Ten minutes later, to his surprise, he saw someone leave their tent, and quickly recognized her as Hermione. Noticing him sitting in the field near the main table, she walked over to him. She conjured her own chair and sat next to him.

"Can't sleep?"

He nodded. "A lot to think about."

"I guess so," she agreed. "What's that?"

He saw that she was looking at the necklace. "Dumbledore left me this, I'm going to use it for—"

To his surprise, Hermione beamed. "Oh, Harry, that's wonderful!" she squealed, grasping his arm for a few seconds. "I'm so happy for you!"

His face showed his confusion. "Why?" He would have been very surprised if Luna had already been talking about it.

"You may have thought that was an ordinary magical necklace, but it's actually a unique artifact, fairly well known in wizard lore," she explained. "It's called the Amulet of the Moon, and I've read a few stories of wizards who've used it in the past. It's great that you're using it."

"But that doesn't explain what you were so excited about."

"It means that you and Luna love each other!"

"But my intention was just to have us both wear it as a way to communicate, because of what happened with her."

She smiled. "That may have been your intention, but... the necklace won't work unless the two people love each other, in a romantic way. If you didn't love her, and she you, you couldn't be wearing that right now, and neither could she."

He shook his head. "Wow. I didn't know that." After a silence, he added, "Lucky that that ended up being the case."

She chuckled. "You mean, you didn't know?"

He thought about it. "I knew she was... special, and that I felt very close to her. I felt like I could talk to her about anything. But I think I was trying not to think about it. Maybe I was just trying to get used to being Auror Leader, and needed to focus on that. I didn't imagine that anything like this would happen on the island."

"I can understand that."

There was another silence as they both looked up at the stars. "Were you upset with George earlier?"

"I wasn't happy," she conceded. "It's always easier to know these things after the fact. And even though it seemed like he was attacking you, I felt like he was attacking me, because while you agreed with it, it was my idea."

"Which reminds me... I kind of hate to say this, or I should say, my ego doesn't like it. But Kingsley had a good point earlier, that I should be more analytical about it, not let my ego get in the way. Good advice, if you can take it. Anyway... you and Ron have always tended to rely on my advice in that kind of situation, and, you know, that's flattering. But clearly, I was wrong about not calling Kreacher last year, and if I was wrong about that, I could be wrong about other things. Now, not that I'm not going to be right most of the time, at least I hope. But it occurred to me that it's important that you think things over carefully yourself. Try to figure out where I might be wrong, what assumptions I might be making, how I'm weighing the risks. Even if you don't find anything, it's still worth doing."

He nodded, impressed. Still, he found he couldn't resist a small joke. Deadpan, he responded, "So, you're saying I shouldn't trust you."

She glared at him for a second before realizing he wasn't serious. She sighed in annoyance. "Don't do that. That was hard for me to say."

"Sorry."

"I guess everyone wants to feel indispensable," she mused.

He responded quickly. "I don't."

"No, I guess you wouldn't, because you are indispensable, and you've never liked it. I'm sorry." She reached over and took his hand in sympathy. "I'm glad you have Luna. I think she's better for you than you know. But no matter what pressure you're under, always remember that you have her, you have me and Ron, and you have all the people on this island who care about you. You should never think that because you're Auror Leader, you can't reach out to us for support. We cared about you before you were Auror Leader. When you were just Harry."

He appreciated her words, and her gesture; he felt that she was the only woman he knew who he could hold hands with as he was doing and not have it be misunderstood, by them or by anyone who knew them.

"I feel like before I was Auror Leader, I was the Boy Who Lived. I feel like I've never been 'just Harry.'"

She gripped his hand a little harder. "To me and Ron, to Luna, to Ginny and all the Weasleys, to Neville... you've always been 'just Harry.'"

He looked at her, and realized that as had been the case with Luna earlier, even if he didn't say the words, she would know from his eyes how he felt. Funny how I never really noticed that before, he thought.

* * * * *

The next day was pleasant, even though he was very busy confirming plans and coordinating activities. He enjoyed the morning walk with

Luna, and they found that they could indeed communicate at a distance; if one talked while looking up at what the other was looking at, the other could hear, though that sound would not be audible to anyone near the listener.

He was aware that the topic of his and Luna's new relationship was being talked about all day. Even though it wasn't mentioned at meals, his improved hearing caught snippets of conversation here and there. At one point he overheard Neville and Ginny talking about it, both expressing satisfaction that he had found someone. Harry realized that this must have made Neville in particular feel better, since he had felt guilty over becoming Ginny's new boyfriend, even though she was completely unattached at the time.

Terry and Hermione had identified 10:06 p.m., give or take a few minutes—they were becoming ever more confident in their predictions—as the time when the switch would occur. It would last for five hours and twelve minutes, so Harry and the others would have a chance to get more done than usual. They had a late dinner to compensate for the fact that they would be up so late. As ten o'clock approached, Harry felt like a sprinter in the starting blocks, waiting for the gun to go off. Luna told him not to worry, that if there was no immediate danger—and he would know if there was, by what he saw through her eyes—he should take what time he felt necessary before coming to get her. Nonetheless, he was still anxious.

At 10:04, Harry was one of a dozen who was sitting at the table, waiting for the switch. Feeling ever more tense, he suddenly felt a hand on his arm; he hadn't noticed Luna sit next to him. "It'll be okay," she assured him.

It occurred to him that this was the first public display of affection they had indulged in since becoming a couple, but it was no problem, since everyone now knew anyway. A half a minute later, Ginny walked over. Leaning over and speaking quietly, she uncomfortably said, "Look... I'm very sorry, and I hate to say this, but I wonder if you'd..."

Harry and Luna both immediately understood, and withdrew their arms. "You're afraid that your counterpart will see that, if we switch like this." She nodded.

"Don't worry, it's okay," said Luna. "We understand. But you know, now with these," she gestured to her necklace, "it's not going to be a secret for very long. Anyone who sees both of us..."

"I know," she said. "I just don't want her to find out like this. I've already changed the note I wrote her, basically emphasizing that whatever happens here might not happen there, since things are so different

He was in a tent, a smallish one compared to what they had on the island. They were sitting on the ground at a small circular table; Ron and Hermione were to his left and right, with Malfoy opposite.

Before Harry could speak, Malfoy did. "Wow. Well, it's not going to take long to tell you two apart now. Who's—"

"We're going, Malfoy," said Harry, standing as he spoke. "You ready?"

"What's the rush, Potter?"

Harry ignored Malfoy for the moment as he looked upwards without moving his head, and saw from Luna's perspective. "Look from your far left to your far right, slowly," he said to her. He heard Hermione explaining the situation to Malfoy, but his attention was with Luna as his view slowly moved from one side to the other. From having been in the room before, he knew that she was tied up in the same place she had been a year ago. He saw a man sitting in a chair across the room, reading a book.

"Is it important that we come right this second?" Harry asked, keeping his eyes planted upward so she could hear him. His view through her eyes swiveled to her left, then back to center again. As prearranged, left meant no, right meant yes, and darting back and forth meant 'I don't know.'

“Okay, we’ll take a couple of minutes to plan how to come in. I’ll keep my eyes on your view.” He looked at Malfoy, tilting his head down a little so he could look at Malfoy while keeping an eye on Luna’s view, which started at a point just above Malfoy’s head. I guess this is what the Muggles on TV call split-screen, he thought wryly, except it’s top-and-bottom instead of right-and-left.

“There’s one man, in a chair against the far wall, reading a book,” he told Malfoy.

Appearing impressed that Harry could get such information, Malfoy nodded. “Do you recognize him?”

“Nobody I know. What I want to do... I was going to just have us go in there with guns blazing, but—“

“What?”

“Sorry, I mean, instantly on the attack. But this—and I don’t want to take any longer than I have to, someone could come in at any time—this gives us an opportunity I hadn’t expected. I want us to Apparate in under the Cloak. He’ll hear the noise, but I’ll be able to get him before he has a chance to shout; I’ll stick my wand under the Cloak and fire. This gives us the flexibility to leave him behind if we want to, since I don’t want it to be known who did this.”

“Why don’t you want it to be known who did it? I wouldn’t mind them knowing I did it. Bastards are in my house!”

Harry sighed; for some reason, he thought he’d already been through this with Malfoy. “If they know it’s me, they’ll go nuts, overreact. Pull everyone who knows me in for questioning, maybe torture them at Hogwarts, try harder to find the Weasleys. I don’t want a full-on fight, not until we’re ready. I’m going to do stuff, but try very hard not to leave my fingerprints on it. Okay?” The tone of the last word made it not a question, but an expectation that Malfoy wouldn’t argue.

Malfoy shrugged in mild annoyance at Harry’s tone. “Whatever, Potter. As long as we get the book.”

“That’s the plan.” He took out the Cloak, stood to Malfoy’s right, and they both crouched down as he arranged the Cloak so it covered both of them. “Are we okay?” he asked Hermione.

“I can see your foot a little bit.”

Harry moved closer to Malfoy, putting his left arm around Malfoy’s shoulders. Malfoy shot him a look. “I’m not gonna be your girlfriend, Potter.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “And thank God for that. Operational necessity, Malfoy. The Cloak isn’t huge, and I have to be touching you.” He snuck his wand under the Cloak; it peeked out only a few inches. “Hermione?”

“You’re fine.”

Ron leaned over, reached under the Cloak, and handed Malfoy a medium-sized pouch that looked like a coinpurse. “Here’s your Portkey. Next person that touches it comes right back here.”

“Okay, Weasley, got it.”

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Harry willed himself and Malfoy to the desired spot, a few yards in front of their target. Instantly they were there, and Harry shot off the Stunning spell so fast that the man had barely registered the Apparition sound before he crumpled to the ground, the book falling to rest beside his head. Malfoy raised his eyebrows slightly in recognition of the speed of Harry’s reflexes.

Harry threw off the Cloak and instantly pointed the wand at Luna, unlocking her chains. She walked over to them; he met her halfway with a quick hug as Malfoy bound the captive with magical ropes.

They walked towards Malfoy. “Hello, Draco,” said Luna.

Surprised at the form of address, Malfoy mutely nodded. To Harry, he asked, "Are we sending him back?"

"I was thinking about sending Luna back with him."

"I shouldn't go yet," she said. "You two need to move through the house to get to where the books are. If I stay here, I can be an extra pair of eyes. Peek through the door, you can know if someone's coming, like that."

"I don't like it."

She smiled a little. "Harry, that's sweet. But you're going to have to let me decide what risks I want to take, and this isn't much of one. Right now you need to think of me as an asset, not a girlfriend."

He grunted. "I'll do my best. Malfoy, leave the Portkey here, put it... over there, near where she'll stand to look at the door. Luna, please, at the first sign of trouble, or that you've been seen, grab the Portkey. Okay?"

She nodded. "I promise."

"Thanks." He moved the man's body to where Luna could more easily keep an eye on it; he knew the man wouldn't be waking up for an hour, and the ropes weren't going anywhere, but better to be safe.

He and Malfoy climbed the stairs and peeked through the half-open door; they saw no one. Harry threw the Cloak over them. "Lead the way, very slowly."

They crept down a short hall and into the wide-open area that connected the front door, the living room, and the kitchen. "Where is everyone?" whispered Harry.

"How would I know?" Malfoy whispered back. They kept moving towards another hallway, leading to another door; this one was closed.

Harry put his left hand on Malfoy's right shoulder. "When I push down, crouch down, and we can fire under the Cloak," he whispered.

"Thanks, Potter," Malfoy shot back in a whisper. "If we ran into somebody, I was planning on standing here like a moron, doing nothing. Glad you set me straight."

Harry had already decided to try to overlook any snide comments Malfoy might make. "In a situation like this, it's better to be sure. Want to get the door?"

With his wand, Malfoy opened the door, slowly and noiselessly. Nothing happened. The walked down marble stairs into a wide room that looked like a storeroom, with many shelves containing neatly stacked supplies of all types.

"Can we take this thing off now?" Malfoy whispered. They both looked around carefully, and took off the Cloak.

"Weird how nobody's around," muttered Malfoy.

"Do you think we should bring Luna in here to watch this door," Harry asked Malfoy, "or leave her where she is to watch the prisoner?"

"Bring her here," said Malfoy. "The ropes'll keep him for an hour, easy."

Harry Propulsed the Cloak to Luna, who put it on and made her way over, then sat near the top of the stairs with the door open, the Cloak covering her. Harry looked over at Malfoy, who had already unearthed a secret storage area under a normal-looking section of floor. He walked over.

"Not bad," he said, as Malfoy started to reach into the open space. "But there's—Malfoy, no! Don't reach in there!" He lunged for Malfoy's right arm, but Malfoy had already moved it away fast.

"What the hell, Potter?"

“There’s a field, a magical field, covering the top of it,” explained Harry. “It looks pretty nasty. I think anyone who puts their hand in there will lose it.”

Malfoy looked at Harry as though he’d lost his mind. “What makes you think there’s a field there?”

“I can see it. Another Auror Leader thing. I can see magic, all magic.”

“Must be convenient,” mused Malfoy, trying not to appear envious but failing.

“How’s your Analyze spell?”

“Better than yours, I’d guess,” responded Malfoy, who pointed his wand at the opening; nothing happened. Harry did the same, with the same result.

Malfoy shrugged. “Well, my father’s no amateur.” He went silent, apparently thinking about what to do next.

“I could get Hermione over here,” Harry mused aloud.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Yes, you and Weasley, that’s your solution for everything. ‘Granger will know what to do!’ It’s none of my business, Potter, but if you’re going to be Auror Leader, you’re going to start having to think for yourself.”

Ironic, thought Harry, that she and I talked about this just last night. “That’s true, but as Auror Leader, if I don’t know something, I need to admit that and call on whoever I can who does know. I haven’t exactly had a lot of time to study up for this job. I’ll learn as I go.”

“Whatever. You really think Granger will know what to do?”

“Not necessarily. It’s more that she’d have a better chance than anyone else.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have some special Auror Leader power that can cancel complex spells, would you?”

Suddenly wondering if it was possible, Harry pointed his wand at the field and tried. A powerful burst of flame shot up from the hole in the floor; Harry and Malfoy, both sitting on the floor near it, scrambled backwards. The flame died down quickly; Harry checked himself for burns, but had none.

"Remind me never to suggest anything like that again," muttered Malfoy. "And warn me next time, okay?"

"It sounded like you were suggesting it."

"'You wouldn't happen to have' isn't the same thing as 'please do immediately without thinking,' at least according to the vocabulary I know," responded Malfoy sardonically. "But for your sake, I'll try to be more careful about how I phrase things. For my sake as well, apparently," he added.

"Sorry," said Harry. It was becoming an effort to remain polite in the face of Malfoy's many snide comments, but he knew that as Auror Leader, he had to control his emotions and think first about the success of the mission. Easier said than done sometimes, he mused to himself.

After a minute more of thinking, he suddenly realized he'd forgotten something. He turned his head and spoke in the direction of the stairs. "Luna, you wouldn't know how to get through this, would you?"

"Sorry, no," she replied. "But thank you for thinking of me."

As he turned back to look at the field again, it occurred to him that from any other person, her comment could be taken as a sarcastic version of 'why didn't you ask me in the first place, do you think I know so much less than Hermione?' He knew, though, that Luna wouldn't resort to such sarcasm, for which he was grateful. At the same time, he did feel a little guilty that he hadn't asked her right away. She had been a Ravenclaw, after all.

"Hey, Potter. What's the color of the field?"

Harry looked closely. "Seems like mostly black and gray, with a little purple mixed in."

Malfoy perked up. "Is the purple any particular shape?"

"No, why?"

"Purple is the primary Slytherin color, but it's also the most important color in my family's coat of arms," explained Malfoy. "And the other colors in the coat of arms are black and gray. I think that my father, or for all I know his father, set this up so that only a Malfoy can reach in there. I'm going to try."

"Whoa, whoa! Weren't you the one complaining about doing things without thinking?"

"I have thought about it."

"For how many seconds?"

"I don't think we're going to find any other way, Potter. It's this or nothing. But I think this is it. I have a feeling."

Harry gave him a 'you're crazy, but okay' look. "I have a feeling I want to stand back. And use your left hand, so at least you'll still have your right one."

"Was planning to," replied Malfoy as he started to reach in. Harry moved back a few inches, but found he wanted to stay close in case Malfoy was successful. Malfoy's hand broke the surface of the field, but nothing happened.

Malfoy grinned. "Field still there?"

"Yep."

"That's what I thought. I was right." He reached in farther, his arm almost completely in the opening in the floor. He felt around for a minute, then withdrew his arm, a large, two-inch-thick hardback book in his hand. "This thing is heavy," he said as he set it gently on the

floor. He covered up the opening, and the floor looked as it had before.

“Okay, good job. Now, let’s get out of here.”

“Wait, Potter, not so fast. There’s a few things we can do here; there’s lots of supplies, some of which could be helpful.”

“Okay, but I don’t want to take forever.”

Malfoy started filling up a shoulder bag, then handed it to Harry and grabbed another. Harry was impressed that there also seemed to be a supply of shoulder bags; Malfoy had already placed the book into one.

“One more thing, Potter,” said Malfoy upon finishing filling the second bag. “We need to check the house, see if anyone’s here.”

Harry was mystified. “Why?”

“I think we can take the house.”

Harry looked at Malfoy as though he’d taken leave of his senses. “Yeah, if nobody’s here, we can certainly take it,” responded Harry. “We just couldn’t keep it.”

“The Apparition parlor can be disabled,” said Malfoy animatedly, referring to the area near the front door which allowed Apparition. “Nobody would be able to get in!”

“How about the front door?”

“There are defenses.”

Harry exhaled slowly. It didn’t seem possible, but he didn’t feel qualified to make that judgment. He decided to put it off. “Okay, we’ll search the house, under the Cloak,” he agreed. “If no one’s here, we’ll think about it more. If we see anyone, I’m Apparating both of us out of here. Agreed?”

“If there’s only a couple, we can take them!”

Harry could see that Malfoy was very enamored of this idea. “We’ll see what’s there.”

On the way out of the room, he was going to ask Luna to stay where she was, but then realized that he and Malfoy would need the Cloak. “Luna, I want you to go back. Take the Portkey, tell Ron and Hermione what’s happened, and that I might want them and you to come back here. Ask them if they know where the Apparition parlor is. Oh, and take these bags.” He handed her his, and gestured for Malfoy to do the same.

Malfoy handed over one of the two bags he was carrying. “The book stays with me.”

Harry shrugged, and turned to Luna. “I’ll be in touch after we’ve searched the house.”

She nodded. “Be careful.”

He smiled a little. “I plan to.” She Summoned the Portkey, and vanished. He looked up to get her view, and saw Ron and Hermione talking to her. At least she’s safe, he thought. Good thing she’s not going to be an Auror, I don’t think I could take that.

Harry and Malfoy crept around the large mansion, and after ten minutes, had found nothing. Harry took off the Cloak, folded it, and put it into his robes.

Harry talked to Luna, and found that Hermione remembered where the Apparition parlor was; she would escort Ron while Luna Apparated by herself. Soon, all five were standing not far from the front door.

“Harry,” said Hermione, “if Malfoy got the book, then why are we here?”

“Malfoy wants to take the house, take it back from the Death Eaters and hold it—“

“What??” exclaimed Ron loudly. Hermione looked surprised, but said nothing.

Harry gave Ron a warning look. “I assume, Malfoy, that you’re thinking we’d use it as a base, something like that?”

“Exactly.”

“Have a base at Malfoy Manor?” repeated Ron incredulously. “A haunted house might be better for morale, think of all the—“

“Ron,” said Harry sharply, as Malfoy looked daggers at Ron. “First of all, Malfoy, did you disable the Apparition parlor again?”

“Yeah, I did,” said Malfoy. “And look, this can work. The—“

“Ginny’s never going to agree to stay one minute here,” said Ron to no one in particular. “After what Lucius Malfoy—“

“Ron!” Harry nearly shouted, glaring at his friend. “As Auror Leader, I’m ordering you not to say another word!”

Ron and Malfoy wore almost identical surprised expressions; Ron turned away in anger. “This decision,” said Harry, “is going to be made based on the merits. If we can hold it, we’ll stay. If not, we won’t. Now, Hermione, do you think we can hold this?”

She asked Malfoy to explain the exact nature of the mansion’s defenses. After he did, she paused and thought. “If we had fifteen or twenty here, and were defending against thirty, we could hold it, although our lives would be difficult. It would be like living under siege. But the problem is this: Malfoy may have a legal right to live here, but the government is working for what’s-his-name. They would just tell the Ministry that someone else rightfully owns the home, they’d get fifty or sixty stationary magic specialists, and come out here. It would take them only a few days, a week at the most, to take apart the defenses, and that would be that. Not only that, it would take away our flexibility, we’d spend all our time defending, not attacking. But that aside... I’m sorry, Malfoy, but it just won’t work.”

Harry was impressed that unlike Ron, Hermione seemed to have discerned that this was important to Malfoy. Malfoy spent a few minutes debating it with her, but she held her ground, and he finally, very reluctantly, conceded.

“Okay,” said Harry. “You guys leave; I’m going to go put that guy in the chair, prop him up so it’ll look like he fell asleep, and give him a light Memory Charm so he won’t even remember the Apparition sound. Then I’ll be right along.”

Malfoy appeared to be holding in frustration. “I’m going somewhere else. I’ll be back to the tent in two hours or less.” Before Harry could think of a response, Malfoy had stepped into the parlor and Disapparated. Exchanging wondering looks, Hermione, Ron, and Luna stepped into the parlor and Disapparated as well. As he expected, Harry finished his last task in under a minute, and joined his friends.

Back at the tent, Ron asked Harry to step outside for a minute. They walked far enough from the tent that they couldn’t be overheard. “Ron, I’m sorry about doing that—“

Ron waved him off. “No, no, no, I actually wanted to apologize to you. I know I shouldn’t react like that. Mainly, I just wanted you to know why that happened, because you might not have realized it. I myself didn’t realize the reason at first, but... I’m pretty sure that my reaction was affected by the fact that that place has a certain association for me.”

Suddenly it hit Harry what Ron meant. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, and I feel kind of bad that I didn’t. It makes it seem like... like I don’t care about her so much.”

“Well, obviously, I know you do,” said Ron. “You just took a more rational view of it, both then and now. You’re trying to figure out the best thing to do, and there’s nothing wrong with that. I just wanted you to know why I was like that, and I’m not usually going to do that.

“I understand, and I appreciate your telling me that.”

Looking curious, Ron asked, "How was it, working with Malfoy for such a long time, like that?"

"Not too bad. He knows what he's doing, he's no dummy. And he was pretty reasonable, for the most part. He wants to get this done, like we do. But clearly, he's no less affected by his emotions than you, or anyone else. It was easy for me to see that he was angry about his home being taken over by Death Eaters; it may be connected to whatever happened to his parents. So, I want to be cautious not to tick him off too much, which is why I shut you down so fast. He was already emotional, and the last thing I wanted was an unnecessary fight between you and him."

"But why do we have to be the ones not to tick him off? I mean, not to be argumentative, but I am wondering. Can't he cut out the snide comments?"

Harry nodded sympathetically. "It would be nice," he agreed. "I had to hold myself back more than once. If I had to guess, I'd say that he might think we have contempt for him, and are only working with him out of operational necessity—"

"Like you said, he's no dummy," cracked Ron.

"And he might be trying to provoke us, to see if we'll insult him and prove his point. Maybe from his point of view, we have to prove that we consider him an equal, that we respect him. I don't know, it's just a guess. I'm trying very hard to treat him as an equal, as I'd want to be treated. But yeah, it's not easy."

Ron grunted. "No, it's not. But I'll try harder."

Harry clasped Ron's shoulder. "I know. Let's go back to the tent, I have to get ready for the next operation."

"So, you won't let me or Hermione go with you?"

"Sorry. Kingsley also agreed that it's best if it's me alone. I'll be all right." They started walking back.

“Hey, what’s with your using the phrase ‘operational necessity’ all the time? You never used to before.”

“From the Auror Leader portraits,’ said Harry. “They’re always using it.”

“Ah. I suppose I can see why.”

They entered the tent to find Luna and Hermione talking. “I think he’ll understand,” said Hermione. “If it’s what you want, he’ll do it.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Luna. “He can be stubborn.”

“I agree with Hermione, I think it’ll be okay,” Harry reassured her. “Now, remember what I said. I don’t think they’ll take action so very fast after it happened, so you should have enough time. But if anything happens, give me a shout, and get out of there. I’ll drop what I’m doing and go straight there. Okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed. She leaned in for a kiss, then Disapparated.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 10, Cleaning Out Hogwarts: In the other dimension, Harry takes steps to try to end torture at Hogwarts, as Dean and Hermione’s treatment of a captured Death Eater provokes debate.

From Chapter 10: “For Merlin’s sake, Potter!” burst out Malfoy in great annoyance. “Is Granger your brain or something? If she wasn’t around, would you and Weasley be mindless zombies? I’m not going to join your little cult of making sure Hermione approves of everything we do, because she’s the smart one, as she never tired of reminding everyone in class, raising her hand every chance she got. I have a brain of my own, Potter. I read the book, I understand it, I can do the spell. I don’t need Granger to tell me that. Okay?”

Chapter 10

Cleaning Out Hogwarts

Moving his eyes up, Harry saw through her eyes a large, familiar, oldish home. She knocked and entered, and the first thing she saw was the overjoyed and relieved face of Xenophilius Lovegood. As she hugged him, over his shoulder she saw his printing press, with copies of the Quibbler next to it. The headline read, "Potter: Undesirable No. 1." They must have come the same night they took her, he thought.

"Okay, I'm going," he said to Ron and Hermione. "It shouldn't take more than an hour, probably less. I've told Luna I'll check in after an hour, or she'll check with me. If I'm out of contact—which could only mean I got taken by surprise—she'll let you know. But I'm sure nothing will happen."

"We'll be getting ready for you," said Hermione. He nodded and Disapparated.

He was suddenly in the familiar surroundings of the seventh-year dormitory. He looked around and saw Neville, Seamus, Parvati, and to his mild surprise, Lavender. He supposed Parvati had decided that Lavender could be trusted to be quiet, and he had left the decision with Parvati.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Merlin, I almost didn't believe her when she told me you'd do that! How?"

"I told you, he has an artifact," said Parvati, who clearly had decided not to tell her friend everything.

"But you're not our Harry, right? I mean, you do look a little older—"

"No, I'm not your Harry. Neville, are we ready? The Room's set up?"

"Everything as it should be," said Seamus confidently. "Like I said, Neville's the man."

Harry grinned. "Yes, he is. Okay, we're off. Sorry I have to do this, but..."

"It's okay," said Seamus. "I mean, probably nothing would happen before the switch, but you're right, it's not worth taking the chance."

"Chance of what?" asked Lavender. Harry slipped the Cloak over himself and Neville, then cast Memory Charms on Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender. He and Neville made their way to the dormitory door.

"Why were we in here, again?" asked Lavender.

"The pleasure of my company, it must have been," responded Seamus as Harry and Neville closed the door behind them. It had been Neville's idea to give them Memory Charms, so that in the unlikely event that they were interrogated about the evening's events under Veritaserum—or by a skilled Legilimens, like Snape—they could truthfully answer that they knew nothing. As older Gryffindors, they would probably be questioned first.

Harry and Neville quietly crept through the common room and through the portrait hole. Moving slowly, they made their way to the Room of Requirement, where they found Terry and Anthony. The latter, like Lavender, seemed very surprised to see Harry, though having been told that he would be there.

"Good to see you, Anthony," said Harry, offering his hand.

Anthony shook it. "Sorry, but I just have to see for myself..." He pointed his wand at Harry's forehead, and again looked shocked at something he already knew. "Merlin..."

"Neville, got the map?"

Neville walked with him to a wall, which showed a map of Hogwarts; of particular interest was the teachers' quarters. Fortunately, the ones he wanted were there. "Okay, this is good. Thanks, Neville."

Neville turned to the two Ravenclaws. "Thanks for holding the room, guys," said Neville. "You staying?"

"I think we'll wait until Harry's done," said Anthony. "After what happened today..." To Harry's inquiring look, Anthony explained, "Four people got tortured today, including Neville. Our Neville," he clarified, glancing at Neville.

"Well, that's going to stop," said Harry firmly. "Now, let me do the first thing, before I forget..."

It took him only a few minutes to find Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem, Apparate to the Chamber of Secrets, use a basilisk fang to kill the Horcrux, then Apparate back to the Room. He handed the diadem to Anthony. "If you could put it back, I'd appreciate it. Sorry, I tried not to damage it too much."

"The way I see it, You-Know-Who damaged it when he put the Horcrux in there," said Anthony, reaching out to take it.

"Okay, I'm off," said Harry as he took a look up to check Luna's status; she was talking to her father. "Neville, Terry, see you on the island. Anthony, thanks for your help, and keep up the fight."

Anthony smiled. "We will, thanks." Harry nodded, threw on the Cloak, and Disapparated.

He suddenly appeared in Amycus Carrow's quarters. Sitting at a desk, the man suddenly looked around, surprised at the Apparition sound.

Harry stuck his wand under the bottom of the Cloak. "Imperio," he whispered. Carrow suddenly sat up straight; Harry threw off the Cloak. "What's the best way to contact your sister without anyone noticing?"

"I send a spell, a bolt of light, that seeks her out," said Carrow dully. "When it reaches her, she will come."

"Good. Please do that." Carrow obediently pointed his wand at the door, and the light traveled out of his wand and through the door.

"Get out a piece of paper, and write down what I say."

"My sister and I have decided to leave Hogwarts," he dictated, looking over the man's shoulder to make sure he was writing it correctly. "We realized that our use of torture is terribly wrong, and we want to atone for our deeds. We cannot stay here, because we know that the students have lost confidence in us. No Hogwarts teacher must torture, or allow torture, ever again. We plan to go to places where our presence will be of benefit to the wizarding community."

Just as he finished, he heard footsteps, and threw on the Cloak again. Alecko Carrow entered the room, and was soon captured by the Imperius Curse as well. "You sign it," said Harry to Amycus, then repeated the instruction to his sister.

He left the note on the table. "Okay, let's go."

With Harry following under the Cloak, the two siblings made their way through the castle. At one point they came across Filch; Harry instructed Amycus to Stun Filch, which of course he did. Amycus aimed at Mrs. Norris, who always accompanied Filch, but she was too quick, dashing off behind a corner. Encountering no one else, they made their way out of the castle, and in a few minutes, were far enough away from the castle to Apparate. Harry accompanied them both back to camp.

As Harry had thought would be the case, Dean and Justin were there. Harry greeted them as he turned the Carrows over to Hermione. "They're all yours," he said. "Did you need me to keep the Imperius Curse on them?"

"No, it's okay," she said. "Dean and I were practicing it earlier today." She cast the spell on them and instructed, "Give me your wands," which they promptly did. "This is good. Dean's counterpart doesn't have a wand, so Dean, keep these in your pocket, and he can choose between them later. It's good to have spares."

"Okay," said Harry. "Hermione, you and Dean do your thing. Ron, Justin, I have one more thing to do at Hogwarts, then I'll be needing you two."

"We'll be here," said Ron.

Harry nodded, put on the Cloak, and Disapparated. He found himself in a room that was almost totally dark, but he didn't remove the Cloak. "Professor," he said in a normal voice. "I need to talk to you."

"What?" said the disoriented voice. "What's going on? I was already asleep, and—"

He turned on the light, and almost at the same instant, Harry pulled off the Cloak. "I'm sorry to disturb your sleep, Professor, but this is important."

Horace Slughorn gaped in astonishment. "P—P—Potter?"

"Yes, Professor. It's good to see you." Harry sat in a chair near the bed as Slughorn sat up on his bed.

"How—how did you get in here?"

"There are some things that you're better off not knowing, Professor. Now, I'm sorry to be abrupt, but there's kind of a time issue. I'd like to ask you a question. Do you want to see You-Know-Who defeated?"

Slughorn appeared mildly offended at the question. "Of course I do," he declared, and Harry's sense told him that the answer was not a lie.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to ask that, Professor, but I wanted to be sure. Now, I wonder if you'd be willing to help me out. There are several types of potions that would be highly useful in what I'm doing, and two especially: Polyjuice Potion and Veritaserum. It would really help me if you would give me as much of those as you have."

Slughorn hesitated. "I want to help, Harry, of course. But the school, Headmaster Snape, relies on me for things like that. The first time he asks me for some Veritaserum and I say I don't have any, he's going to want to know why. And he's a Legilimens."

"It's no problem. You'll be able to honestly say that you don't know what happened to it."

First quizzical, Slughorn's face turned to unhappiness. "Harry, I can't say I fancy being given a Memory Charm."

"No, not many people would," agreed Harry. "But I promise I'll lift it after a few days. The fact is, he's not likely to press you on it, and I can promise you that you won't be a suspect. There will be another much more likely candidate."

"Who would that be?"

"I can't tell you. But believe me, he will not suspect you."

Slughorn nodded. "All right. Let's go."

Twenty minutes later, Slughorn was in his bed sleeping, not aware that anything out of the ordinary had happened. Harry popped back to the Room of Requirement. "Everything went as planned," he reported to Neville, Anthony, and Terry. To Anthony, he had a special instruction. "Tomorrow, start spreading the word around that the Carrows were seen leaving the castle, and that they Stunned Filch when they saw him."

Anthony grinned. "Did they?"

Harry nodded. "They've had a change of heart."

All three students laughed. "That'll be good for morale," said Anthony.

"That's the idea," agreed Harry. "See you." He touched his wand and Disapparated.

Standing outside the door of the house, Harry wasn't surprised to see it suddenly swing open. Luna and her father were sitting on a sofa talking. He walked in. "Hello, Mr. Lovegood."

Looking bewildered, Xenophilius motioned him in to sit down. "Mr. Potter, I—"

"Please, call me Harry."

Xenophilius nodded. "Harry... my daughter has been telling me the most extraordinary things. You and she, she says, are from the twin dimension."

"We're pretty sure of that, yes."

"And you are Auror Leader in that dimension."

"Yes, that's right."

The old man shook his head. "Amazing. Were I to write about it, I would certainly not be believed."

If you wrote about it, yes, Harry uncharitably thought but naturally did not say. "Well, you may be at some point, I hope. I assume Luna's told you that you have to leave. They may have discovered by now that Luna has escaped—"

"For which I thank you, from the bottom of my heart," said Xenophilius effusively. "I was terrified, beyond the power of words to express. I am ashamed to say that I was all too willing to do as they demanded of me," he added, gesturing to one of the new Quibbler issues not too far from him.

"Don't worry about that," said Harry. "But as I was saying, they could be here any time. Are you ready to go?"

"Is it absolutely necessary?"

Harry sensed that he'd been arguing with his daughter over this topic. "Mr. Lovegood, they will absolutely be here before long, and it could be any minute. Every minute you stay puts you and your daughter in danger. We must go now."

Xenophilius sighed. "I simply hate to leave my printing press, which they would likely destroy. Without it I cannot publish, which is my life's work—"

"Daddy," protested Luna, "I already told you—"

“Mr. Lovegood, we may be able to take it with us,” said Harry.

“Luna has already said it could be reduced, but I tell you it is too large for that. I have tried before, and not only did it fail to shrink more than a small amount, but it damaged the mechanism.”

“Just a little bit, Daddy. You were able to fix it in a day.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lovegood, but there’s no choice. Luna, would you Apparate back to the camp, and tell Ron and Justin to come?”

Luna nodded, and within a minute Ron and Justin suddenly appeared in the living room, Ron’s hand on Justin’s shoulder. Harry introduced them to Xenophilius, and explained what they intended to do. He knew it would be better with Hermione, but she was busy, and couldn’t be reached in any case. He and Ron would have to do the best they could.

“No reason this can’t work two-person,” said Harry to Ron. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

They backed off a few meters, pointed their wands at the machine, and fired. As Harry hoped and expected, the spells fell in together and became one. The spell hit the printing press, and it immediately shrank to about a third of its former size; it was now approximately the size of a Muggle dishwasher, perhaps a little smaller.

“Merlin,” whispered Xenophilius.

Luna Apparated back in. “Wow, pretty good.”

“That ought to be good enough,” said Ron. “Justin?”

The two of them picked it up, each with one hand from opposite sides. Justin was holding a tennis ball, which was no doubt the Portkey. “Catch,” he said, and tossed it to Ron, who missed it entirely as the ball rolled across the living room. Justin gave Ron a humorous ‘you couldn’t catch that?’ look; Ron shrugged.

“Here you go,” said Harry, Summoning the ball across the room to Ron, who caught it this time. Both men and the printing press disappeared.

“I must get all my tools,” said Xenophilius, still quite surprised that it had been accomplished. “I fear it will be difficult to set right, but as you say, there was no choice.” He and Luna started packing.

Ron Apparated back in and stood next to Harry. “Where are we going to put that thing? And him, for that matter?”

“That’s next on the list,” agreed Harry. He looked at his watch; the time read 12:10. “Ten past midnight, so we have about three hours. Still some things to do.”

“Wonder how Hermione and Dean are doing,” said Ron.

Harry patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

* * * * *

Hermione Apparated onto the London street under the Cloak with Amycus Carrow. Unable to take off the Cloak—it was late, but this was a fairly busy area—she had them duck into an alley, then took it off. “Don’t move,” she instructed him, Disapparated, then came back with Dean.

Dean looked around, both of them under the Cloak. “Ah, Earl’s Court tube station. Any particular reason?”

She shrugged. “I’ve been here a few times, and I read a few months ago—well, last year, but a few months ago from now—that they installed an old-style police box in front of the station. It seemed like a good place.”

“Why not a police station?” he asked.

“I wanted there to be plenty of witnesses,” she replied. “Okay, let’s go.”

Still using the Imperius Curse, she instructed him to approach the police box, pick up the phone, and plead for the police to come, saying that there was an emergency. After he did, she had him hang up the phone.

He then started to howl like an animal, getting strange and alarmed looks from the passersby. "What did you do that for?" she asked Dean.

Dean shrugged. "Adds to the whole atmosphere we're trying to create. Also, it should help the police get here faster."

Indeed, in less than two minutes, two uniformed officers, one taller and one shorter, came jogging up. "Quiet down, sir. Now, what seems to be the problem?"

Dean waved his wand under the Cloak. Carrow immediately reached down, through his buttoned but unzipped pants, and proceeded to begin urinating in the direction of the shorter officer's feet.

"What the hell?" sputtered the officer, who tried to dance out of the way of the stream as Carrow updated his aim. The other officer grabbed Carrow from behind by the shoulders and pushed him face first into the side of the blue police box. He moved Carrow's hands behind his back and held them there.

"Jesus Christ!" fumed the officer. "What's wrong with this idiot?"

"Must be a drunk," said the officer holding Carrow.

"I am not drunk!" shouted Carrow loudly, again following Dean's instructions. "I must pee on your shoes!"

The two policemen exchanged incredulous looks. The one holding Carrow leaned close to his face. "Doesn't smell drunk, no alcohol," he said.

"I'm taking off the Imperius Curse," whispered Dean to Hermione.

“What’s your name?” demanded the other officer, still angry over Carrow’s assault.

“My name is Willie Dean. I must pee on your shoes!”

“Why?”

“Because the voices tell me to!”

“What voices?”

Carrow looked around, as if seeing his surroundings for the first time.
“What is this? Where am I?”

“You’re in London, mister. Howling and peeing like a bloody animal. Now, would you like to explain yourself?”

Carrow struggled against the officer, who firmed his grip on Carrow as the other officer produced handcuffs and snapped them onto Carrow. “You must release me at once!”

“Not likely. You’d better—“

“I am Amycus Carrow, Professor at Hogwarts! Release me at once, or my retribution will be swift and merciless!”

“Yeah? What are you going to do, pee on us again?”

“Wait,” said the tall one. “What did you say your name was?”

“My name is Willie Dean! I must pee on your shoes!”

“Oh, dear,” the tall man said to his colleague. “One of these.”

“I am telling you,” said Carrow dangerously, “you are in great peril. I am one of the most important wizards in England, a leading follower of the Dark Lord. If you continue to detain me, your deaths will be slow and painful.”

“Or moist, at least,” retorted the shorter man, unimpressed. “Threatening a police officer. Ted, cameras getting all this?”

“Yes, they are,” confirmed the tall officer. “I’m calling this in, getting a car. Don’t want this moron to pee on anyone else on the way to the station. What do you think, Mark? Hallucinogens?”

“Nah, I think he’s a straight-ahead fruitbat. Nothing fancy.”

“Muggles!” exploded a furious Carrow. “You are nothing but vermin! Led by the Dark Lord, we will destroy you all!”

Ted looked at Mark. “Yeah, okay, I’m beginning to see your point on that. Say, Willie, what’s the Dark Lord’s name?”

The change in Carrow’s demeanor was immediate; fear was in his eyes. “Of course, we cannot say his name.”

“And why not?”

“No one dares say the name! Anyone who does will be seized immediately by the Dark Lord’s agents! As will you, once he hears of this!”

“Maybe he’s called ‘The Great Urinator,’” suggested Mark.

“See, Mark, and you were complaining yesterday that this job was getting boring.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “I didn’t want it to be so exciting that I’d need new shoes.”

“I must pee on your shoes!” insisted Carrow, twisting his body and producing a small stream of urine aimed at the shorter officer again, narrowly missing the shoes, as he couldn’t aim with his hands.

“Bloody hell!” cursed Mark, stepping out of the way again. “I’m standing behind this idiot. You move him in.”

“His thing’s hanging out of his pants!”

"I'm not gettin' near his thing or his pants! You pull 'em up." As the tall officer pulled up on Carrow's pants, Carrow twisted around again, livid at the circumstances in which he'd unexpectedly found himself. "You will be exterminated! You are beasts!"

"Well, at least we don't pee on people's shoes," retorted Mark from behind Carrow.

"I must pee on your shoes!" cried Carrow, twisting with all his might, but held firmly in place. A slowly expanding wet area was visible in the front of Carrow's pants.

The car pulled up, and the officers slowly moved him towards it. "Mark, let's not say anything more to him. It just seems to aggravate him."

"He's bound to run out of pee at some point," muttered Mark as he closed the door on the police car, which drove away.

Hermione grabbed Dean's arm and Apparated them back to the camp. Throwing off the Cloak, still on the ground, they dissolved into hysterical laughter. Ron and Justin looked at them, at each other in confusion, then back to Dean and Hermione. "Hermione?" asked Ron. "What happened?"

She tried to stop laughing. "He—Dean told him—" was as far as she got before bursting into laughter again, which set Dean off anew. Lying on the ground, neither could control their laughter.

Bewildered, Ron looked at Justin. "Wow. I've never seen her like this."

"We'd better give them five or ten minutes to get over it," suggested Justin. "But I was talking to Dean before, and I have a sense of why it might be so funny. Dean said that he was going to set it up so that when Carrow was asked his name, he'd say, 'I am Willie Dean, and I must pee on your shoes.' And, he'd say 'I must pee on your shoes' any time he saw shoes or heard the word 'shoes.' And not only would he say it, he would try to actually do it."

Ron grinned. "Sounds good. I'm looking forward to seeing it in the Pensieve when we get back. But all this was for a laugh? Doesn't seem like something Hermione would do."

"Well, Dean was going for a laugh with that, but given their condition, it seems to have been that something unexpected happened," suggested Justin. "But humor wasn't the main point. The point is to make it appear that Carrow is crazy, and judging from their reaction, it looks like they succeeded."

"But they can't keep him under the Curse anymore," pointed out Ron.

"Don't—need to," gasped Dean, finally starting to recover, as was Hermione. "He'll do the rest himself." Looking at Hermione, he added, "His retribution will—" He failed to finish the sentence as they both fell about laughing again.

"See," said Justin, "the brilliance of Dean and Hermione's plan—a non-Muggle-born could never have thought of it—is that a Muggle will think a wizard is crazy just for saying what to us is ordinary, for wizards. Add to that a few well-chosen crazy-sounding hypnotic suggestions, and they're in the loony bin, probably for good. They have no wand, the Dark wizards have no idea where they are, and the Muggles do our work for us. They're out of commission until we go and get them."

"Dean, stop it," pleaded Hermione as she stood. "Don't try to make me laugh again, at least not until we're back on the island." To Ron, she explained, "Part of the problem was that we were under the Cloak, we had to suppress our laughter, or we'd be heard. And it was really funny. So when we got back, it all just spilled out. Things seem even funnier if you have to suppress the laughter."

"Not that Carrow's performance needed any help to be funny," chuckled Dean.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Okay, are we ready to do the other one?"

Dean nodded. "Think this one'll be as funny?"

"I hope not," said Hermione. "I don't think I could take it."

* * * * *

A half hour later, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Dean, Justin, Luna, and Xenophilius were in or near the tent in which Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Malfoy had been staying. Malfoy Apparated back to the site, and signaled Harry that he wanted to talk privately. They walked off, about thirty yards, to be alone.

"I assume you know that they're not staying," Malfoy said.

"You mean the Lovegoods?" asked Harry, thinking he knew but wanting to be clear.

"I mean, anybody but the four of us. That was the understanding when we started, and I don't fancy that understanding being changed without my consent."

"No, I know," agreed Harry. "I wasn't planning on them staying, but it was important for them to get out of their house. Justin said that Colin's family is pretty well off, and they have a little guest house that he can persuade their parents to let Luna and her father stay for a few days."

"Doesn't Lovegood have his own tent? A lot of people do, for camping."

"Hmmm, I didn't think to ask, but I will. Anyway, this does bring up the question of money."

"You mean, to buy a tent?"

"Yeah, like that. I need to get into my vault, or into Grimmauld Place, either one. Did my counterpart say anything about the notion of trying to get back into Grimmauld Place?"

Malfoy nodded. "He has no objections to your trying to call the house-elf, but he'd rather you didn't try Grimmauld Place until you have some reason to think it isn't dangerous. Granger is pretty wary of it. As for the vault, he leaves that to your judgment."

"Okay. Have you gotten in contact with that kitten guy?"

Malfoy grinned. "Be sure to say that to his face. He'll love it. Yeah, he wants a face-to-face, told me to tell him when and where. I haven't responded yet. I'd bet, though, that a tent is going to be through the roof. It'll cost."

"You mean, a higher percentage than other things?"

"Yes. See, Potter, the hotter you are, more quiet it has to be, and the more it costs. Like I said before, being wanted by the Dark Lord, we could hardly be hotter. He's taking a risk dealing with us at all. But a tent, miniature food, things like that, they're perfect for people on the run, and the Ministry will be keeping an eye on those who sell such things. Asking questions about the buyers, wanting to see records, like that. So, more people have to be paid to be quiet, including some in the Ministry. And he'll want a higher profit, to compensate for the higher risk. Just so you know what you're getting into."

"Hmmm. Suppose I walked into a shop in Diagon Alley, with Polyjuice Potion, and just tried to buy one. Think I could do it?"

"Depends. How good a liar are you?"

"Not very."

"Thought so. They ask you questions, you have to be able to think on your feet, be a good actor. I could probably do it, but I'm more interested in getting rid of the Dark Lord than putting people up."

"Luna's doing what she can to help us, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. "A lot of people are. You need to help the people who are helping you. I wasn't going to leave her to rot, or worse, in Malfoy Manor. And having broken her out, her father wasn't safe. So, that becomes my responsibility."

“Especially since she now seems to be your girlfriend.”

“Doesn’t matter. They kidnap you, I’ll take risks to bust you out.”

Malfoy nodded his acknowledgment. “What did you mean, ‘or worse?’”

“Don’t mention this, and we don’t know for sure, but... we think that after she was abducted—it was just before the last switch—this side’s Luna may have been sexually assaulted.”

Malfoy thought for a few seconds. “Short, slim guy? Dark hair, pattern baldness?”

“That was more or less how she described him, yes.”

“I know who he is, his bark is worse than his bite,” said Malfoy confidently. “Can’t be certain, of course, but I doubt he did anything serious. Likes to paw at anything female, but no balls to speak of.”

“Our Luna was a guest at Malfoy Manor for a much longer time, until we rescued her. Well, sort of. She said that your counterpart kept that guy off her.”

Malfoy’s eyebrows went up. “Well... that was very gallant of me.”

Harry grinned. “I thought so.” To his surprise, Malfoy shared a smile with him.

“So, what about Kitterman?”

“I need to know about the money first. Let’s go back to the camp, I’ll try to call Kreacher.”

“Nah, call him from here. Nobody’s going to be with him, Granger was just being weird.”

“Yeah, probably, but this is a little close to the camp. Let’s Apparate further away, and if someone comes, we’ll just go back to the camp.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever. She's made you weird, now."

Harry Apparated them a mile away, then spoke. "Kreacher!"

Nothing happened. "Should I try it louder?" Harry asked Malfoy.

"Doesn't matter. You could whisper and he'd hear you."

"So... he's sleeping?"

Malfoy shook his head. "He'd wake up, and come. Coming when your master calls is a very important magic for house-elves. If you called yours and he didn't come, it means he's dead."

Harry tried again. "Kreacher!"

"But, hey, don't take my word for it," said Malfoy sarcastically.

"Damn it," Harry muttered, frustrated. He wondered how Kreacher had died. Defiantly, at the hands of Death Eaters? If so, Grimmauld Place definitely could not be re-taken.

"I guess this means Kitterman is on hold."

"Guess so. I'll think more about Gringotts between switches. Hey, what about the book?"

"That's what I've been doing, of course," said Malfoy. "It's good news. I read the section carefully, and thoroughly. I can do it, and it's not as hard as I thought it would be. So I'm doing it tomorrow, when the other Potter comes back. The sooner, the better."

Harry nodded. "Good, I'm glad to hear that. But you know, it may not be a bad idea to have Hermione look at it, she might be able—"

"For Merlin's sake, Potter!" burst out Malfoy in great annoyance. "Is Granger your brain or something? If she wasn't around, would you and Weasley be mindless zombies? I'm not going to join your little cult of making sure Hermione approves of everything we do, because

she's the smart one, as she never tired of reminding everyone in class, raising her hand every chance she got. I have a brain of my own, Potter. I read the book, I understand it, I can do the spell. I don't need Granger to tell me that. Okay?"

Harry sighed lightly. "I'm not going to insist. But you know why her hand was up? Because she was always right! That tells you something about whether it's a good idea to trust her. It doesn't mean we don't think. But if you have two good Seekers, and a brilliant one, you use the brilliant one. I don't think you need to be brilliant to understand that.

"But hey, I believe you. You read it, you know it, fine. I was just making a suggestion. No need to get mad."

Malfoy calmed down. "I'm not that mad. It's just that hand-raising stuff always used to bug the crap out of me."

Harry chuckled. "The other Malfoy said that too, almost exactly the same words."

"Not a surprise. Well, let's go back."

It was 1:35 a.m. when Harry began his final task of this busy night. He Apparated to Kingsley's hideout and awoke him, then had Kingsley take him to the site he'd asked Kingsley to find for him. It was nearly perfect: a remote hill which no one lived within a few miles of. There were trees, though not nearly enough to mask the entrance, as was the case with Kingsley's hideout.

Still, Harry was very satisfied. "Thanks, Kingsley, this is great. I'll get Ron and Hermione."

He left, and a half a minute later, all three were there. "Harry, did you plan to carve out living spaces with a Reductor Curse?" Harry nodded. "It's going to take you all night, you know."

"Kingsley, after we fire, would you put up a shield in front of us, for any dirt that comes back at us?"

Kingsley shrugged. "Very little will, but sure, okay."

The three exchanged a look. "One, two, three..." said Harry, and they fired. The three spells met, became one... and blasted a hole in the dirt and rock that Harry estimated was the size of three or four refrigerators. Quite a bit of dirt was reflected back at them; it hit Kingsley's shield and fell to the ground.

"Good Lord," muttered Kingsley. "How did you do that?"

"Ever heard of group spells?" asked Harry as they shot again. "I was in Japan, and learned this idea. The three of us can do this, it makes us pretty powerful." They fired yet again, carving out larger and larger spaces in the side of the hill.

Every now and then they had to pause, to Summon loose dirt and rocks from the ever-expanding cavern they were creating, and soon very large piles of dirt were spread all around. While they cleaned up the dirt, Kingsley did complex stationary magic spells, which Harry saw as magical pillars, providing structural support to the ceiling of the new cavern and preventing any cave-ins.

"Okay, we should probably stop there," said Harry after a half hour; a look at his watch showed that it was 2:10 a.m., and he wanted to be in bed by the time of the switch so that if their counterparts were sleeping on the island, they wouldn't be woken up by finding themselves sitting up when they switched back. "In terms of space, this is pretty good, anyway."

"Bigger than the Burrow, for sure," agreed Ron. "Ceiling could be a little higher in the back, though."

"I was thinking that too," said Hermione. "Next time, we should do some detail work, then finish it up. Kingsley, you're going to have to do a Fidelius Charm on it, and the Secret-Keeper has to be someone who doesn't go bopping back and forth between dimensions."

"I'll work on that," said Kingsley.

“Do we have to worry about, say, Muggle hikers finding this?” asked Ron. “It does look kind of conspicuous.”

“After you guys leave, I’ll do Muggle-repelling spells,” said Kingsley. “They’ll never see this.”

“Thanks, Kingsley,” said Harry. “Okay, let’s get back.”

The three returned to the campsite, where only Malfoy remained. Justin and Dean were back at Justin’s family’s home, where Dean had become a long-term guest; a brief long-distance conversation with Luna told Harry that she and her father were now moving into the Creeveys’ guest home, and Luna was writing a note to her counterpart. Harry talked with a still-awake Malfoy for a few minutes, got into his sleeping bag, and closed his eyes. He didn’t necessarily expect to be asleep by the time of the switch, but he was.

Harry awoke in his own tent on the island; Kingsley had thoughtfully made sure that everyone was in their proper tent before the switch. Harry had already decided that wake-up times would be flexible for the duration of the switching crisis. Everyone was supposed to know the next switching times, and plan their sleep schedules accordingly.

Looking up through Luna’s eyes as he left his tent, he saw nothing but blackness. He guessed she was still sleeping, and had probably been awake when the switch occurred. He walked out to the table. “Hello, everyone.”

Most everyone returned his greeting. “Hermione’s been telling us about last night,” said Kingsley. “You were quite a busy beaver.”

“Thank you, Harry,” said Padma, “for getting rid of the Carrows. You can’t imagine how much that’ll help morale. I’m sure celebrations are going on right now over there.”

“Won’t they just send in more Death Eaters, though, and resume torture?” asked Lee.

“If they do, then I’ll get rid of those,” said Harry. “They’ll get the message. In the note I had Amycus write, I had him say something

like, 'torture must never occur at Hogwarts ever again.' I don't know if Snape'll get the message, but he might."

"But," said George with a big grin, "the stars of the night were Dean and Hermione. Speaking of keeping up morale!" There was scattered laughter at the table.

To Harry's confused look, Ron explained, "Dean put the memory in the Pensieve. I think everybody who's up has seen it by now."

George raised a glass, as if for a toast. "All hail the Great Urinator! May his stream be continuous and eternal!"

Many laughed; Harry looked at George in great confusion. "Go watch it," advised Ron. "You'll understand."

Shrugging, Harry stood and walked to the supply tent, which contained the Pensieve. He put his head in, watched the scene, and walked back to the table, still laughing. "Well, you're right, that was very good," agreed Harry. "I think it may be funnier if you're a Muggle-born, because you can understand the cops' attitude better. But Carrow himself is what really sells it."

Hermione nodded. "It's the contrast between how Carrow sees himself and how the police see him that makes it so funny."

George shook his head a little, as if Hermione had committed a faux pas. "Humor shouldn't be analyzed, Hermione. It should just be enjoyed."

Ron chuckled. "Oh, she enjoyed it plenty last night, believe me."

"So, what did you do with the other Carrow?" asked Corner. "Same thing?"

"Of course not," said George with feigned disdain. "You can't ask a woman to pee on someone's shoes!"

"That one," said Dean, "was a lot less funny."

“Almost sad, really,” added Hermione. “The point is that the behavior has to be something that’ll get you committed. Just being weird isn’t enough; you have to be a danger to yourself or others, or they won’t commit you. The trick is to find that point between not being dangerous enough, and being dangerous but not so much that someone gets hurt or killed. Dean and I discussed it, and decided that certain things like scatology or nudity are in that middle ground.

“So, for Alecto... we hypnotized her with the suggestion that if she’s wearing clothes, it’s very important to take them off immediately. She’ll be agitated if she doesn’t. And...” She hesitated, not wanting to continue.

Dean picked up the thread. “We weren’t sure if that was enough. So, we made it so that she feels a compulsion to... ‘service’ every man she sees.”

There were many surprised looks. “And did anyone get ‘serviced’?” asked George.

“We did want to avoid that actually happening,” said Dean, “not that she wouldn’t deserve it if it did. Teaching that Muggles are lower animals, and all that. We ended up sending her, naked, into a big-city police station. Hermione went in with the Cloak, to see what would happen. She kept getting down on her knees and trying, but of course they wouldn’t let her, and she had a fit when they tried to wrap a blanket around her. Finally they put her into a cell, and called the people in white coats.”

Hermione saw puzzled looks. “He means, Muggles whose job it is to deal with people who are insane.”

“Um,” began Padma hesitantly, “not to criticize, but isn’t that getting close to some ethical boundaries? I mean, maybe it hasn’t happened yet, but it still could, and if it does, that’s coerced performance of sexual activities. You see what I mean.”

Terry shook his head. “You don’t take Muggle Studies. I do, and you should really hear what she says. I’ve got to say, I’ve got no problems with what Dean and Hermione did.”

“Well,” Padma replied, “I was making more of an abstract ethical argument, and for that kind of situation, whether the person deserves it is irrelevant—”

“Yeah, but this is life, and life isn’t abstract,” cut in Terry, sinking his teeth into the argument. “Muggle-borns got severely mistreated, Ron has lots of stories that the Muggle-borns told him. By teaching people to hate and treat Muggles badly, she’s morally culpable for that. Honestly, if she did end up ‘servicing’ somebody, I would consider that poetic justice.”

“You can’t be serious! Would you say it was all right if she was raped?”

“Hermione and Dean’s intent—”

“Answer the question!” Padma demanded. “Would that be all right?”

“No,” Terry conceded, “but their intent was not for it to actually happen; their intent was for her to try to do it and be stopped, and they put her in situations where it would be almost impossible for it to actually happen. And their intent matters in judging their actions.”

“Their intent doesn’t matter—”

“Of course it does, if you’re judging them ethically—”

“Only the chances of it actually happening, which I admit I can’t judge. What do you think, Justin?” Padma turned to her left to look at the surprised Justin. “What are the chances that in the next few months, she’ll succeed in what she’s been hypnotized to try to do?”

Glancing over at Hermione, Harry saw the discomfort on her face. “It’s unlikely, but not impossible,” Justin said. “Everyone at the facility would know about that, and it only takes one unethical worker to take advantage of the situation for it to happen. But the chances are very low.”

Dean shook his head. "The chances are almost zero. Hermione and I had this discussion before doing it, which, I want to say, was my idea. As a man, I'm confident that it wouldn't happen. A man just isn't going to put that into a crazy woman's mouth. She'd be just as likely to bite it off! Men are very protective of that, believe me."

"I'm getting queasy just thinking about it," volunteered George.

Lee nodded in agreement. "Rather lose an ear, huh?"

George snorted. "Rather lose both ears."

Justin spoke again. "Yeah, you have a point; I admit I hadn't thought about it from that perspective. It's hard to imagine any man being that stupid."

"Hermione wasn't sure, but I persuaded her," said Dean. "It's just not going to happen, and I doubt any man at this table disagrees with me. Anyone?"

No one spoke for a few seconds; Dean nodded, satisfied.

Corner spoke up. "Harry, you're the Auror Leader. What do you think?"

With a straight face, he replied, "I wouldn't do it."

Most everyone laughed. "I hope not," joked Ron.

"Yeah, but seriously," urged Corner.

"Like Terry, I've got no problems with what they did. And I also agree with Terry that intent matters. If they'd been like, 'Well, this might happen, but we don't care,' then that wouldn't be good. But they considered it, and decided it was highly unlikely. So, I'm okay. But I also think it's good that Padma brought it up; we do need to think about it, ask ourselves these questions, like Dean and Hermione did before they did that. And we have to keep in mind that by doing this, we're taking Dark wizards out of the game, which makes us all safer."

There were a few seconds of silence. Harry looked at Kingsley, silently soliciting his view. "I've been present for many an Auror debate about topics just like this," said Kingsley thoughtfully, "and I think there are really no right and wrong answers. Everyone's opinion is going to be a little different. What I think is important, like Harry said, is just to have the debate. I'd say that when you're about to do something that you worry is unethical, think about how you would defend your action to other Aurors. If you think you couldn't defend it, then probably you shouldn't do it."

The conversation then went on to other matters, which Harry was happy for it to do, as Hermione still looked uncomfortable. He hoped she wouldn't bend too far backwards the other way; he wanted to make sure those Dark wizards wouldn't get out of the Muggle mental hospitals any time soon.

The next switch would occur the next day, from 5:25 to 11:58 p.m., according to Hermione and Terry. As had become usual, Harry spent most of the day trying to work out the best way to spend the time. A lot depended, of course, on the success or failure of Malfoy's effort to rid Harry of his Horcrux. If it succeeded, more thought could be given to the question of how to defeat Voldemort. If it failed, they would have to try something else.

He spent a half hour in his tent with Luna, talking. As had been the case with their letters before he'd been abducted by the goblins, he found that he felt better when he talked to her. She was worried about how her father would adapt to his new surroundings; at his age, she felt, people didn't react well to change.

He asked her what, if anything, her counterpart had written. She told him that the 'other' Luna had said that her treatment in captivity was 'bad, but could have been worse.' Luna told Harry that she interpreted that to mean that the other Luna may have been groped, but nothing worse than that. Harry could tell that Luna was at least somewhat relieved—he knew that she had feared the worst—but still felt guilty over her role in getting caught, and probably no amount of talking on his part would change that.

Though he thought a lot and made many plans, what frustrated him most was that there simply wasn't, and couldn't be, a plan for ending the switching. He had long since accepted the fact that this was a case of dimensional, not time, changing, but the knowledge didn't help at all in determining what to do about it. Lee, Cho, and Angelina were planning to visit the main public wizarding library to research the phenomenon, but the last switch had occurred too late for them to do so, as the library closed at 5:00 p.m. Their counterparts had been urged to do it, but if they had, they'd given no news of it in their notes, or to Kingsley. In any case, Harry was pessimistic that they would find anything useful. How are we ever going to stop this, he wondered.

He knew that there was no reason that he should be able to come up with anything—after all, what did he know about space/time issues?—except that he was Auror Leader, and so, responsible for everything that happened. Funny, he thought, I try to make her feel better about what happened with her counterpart, but I can't make myself feel better.

He'd discussed a lot with her in their half-hour together, but not this. He strongly felt that he couldn't discuss with her his feeling of responsibility for their current predicament, because she believed that that she herself was responsible. If he brought it up, she would only say that it was her fault, and it wouldn't help either of them. But one of the strongest feelings he had with her was that he could talk to her about anything. Anything but this? He sighed. Relationships are hard, he thought.

* * * * *

The next day, Harry again felt the pressure of the countdown to the switch, though it felt different. Two days ago, there had been a specific mission, with time pressure; now, important plans could not be made until they found out what had happened with Harry's Horcrux. He tried to focus on his practice, and talking with others about what they would do during the switch.

At Kingsley's suggestion, Harry decided that Kingsley and Hestia would receive a debriefing from each Auror trainee (for Luna and Cho, it was optional) about their actions during the last switch, and their

plans for the next one. Their job would be to look at the wide view, and Kingsley's knowledge of the Muggle world would help them use its resources. Kingsley suggested that instead of relying only on magical tents, which were admittedly much more comfortable, they consider acquiring some Muggle tents, which would be perfectly adequate for most purposes. Also, if they were careful about using magic, they could stay in those tents at Muggle campgrounds. Listening to Kingsley, Harry found himself wishing that he and Hermione had thought of some of these ideas last year; it would have made their time on the run much less uncomfortable.

About ten minutes before the switch, Harry saw Hermione walking alone through the trees, evidently just having come back from one of the beaches. He walked over to her; she stopped near the trees, understanding that Harry wanted to talk to her privately.

"Hey," he said. "I hadn't talked to you since yesterday, and I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

"You mean, with Padma?"

He nodded. "That whole thing in general."

"Yes, it's okay. I wasn't happy about it, and it was good of Dean to take responsibility. And yes, it was his idea, but I approved it, which makes me responsible as well. Anyway, Padma talked to me about it yesterday evening, said she wanted to make sure I hadn't misunderstood her. I ended up getting into a conversation with her and a few other people—Justin, Dean, Ron, and Terry—about what to do with other people we need to take out of commission. We found a few good ideas. A trigger to make someone scream or howl in a public place, kiss every baby they see, walk into a restaurant or coffee shop and start spitting into everyone's food or drink. The problem is that even us Muggle-borns can't be sure that it would work, which is why Dean and I chose such extreme ones—they were guaranteed to get the person committed. Padma suggested that I find a Muggle doctor who specializes in this sort of thing, pretend to be a Muggle reporter, and ask specific questions about what kind of person gets committed for nonviolent actions, ask for a few

hypothetical examples. That would help us narrow down what would work.”

Impressed, Harry nodded. “Good idea.”

“I thought so,” she agreed, “except that it would take at least a few hours of my time, maybe more, and we have things to do. I don’t know if you’d want to spare me for that.”

“I’m not sure either,” he admitted. “But if this keeps up, we may have a lot of free time over there. So, if it looks like you’ve got a few hours with nothing to do, it may not be a bad idea.”

She looked at her watch. “We should go to the table, it’s almost time.”

They walked over and sat down. “Say, Harry,” asked George, “is there any progress on a centralized meeting place for us over there?”

“Yeah, we’re working on it. It may be ready this time, definitely next time.”

“Good,” said George.

There were scattered pockets of conversation at the table, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were silent for a few minutes. Harry looked at his watch: 5:25. Was the watch fast, or had Hermione and Terry miscalculated slightly?

Ron leaned over. “You think Malfoy was successful?”

“I sure hope so. I suppose we’re about to

Harry suddenly found himself lying on the ground, staring up at the ceiling of the tent. Hermione was sitting next to him, looking down at him. Ron was on his other side, looking across the room. Harry’s first thought was that this wasn’t good.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 11, Harry's Horcrux: After brushing aside Harry's suggestion that Hermione check the spell, Malfoy's effort to rid the other Harry of his Horcrux ends disastrously.

From Chapter 11: A few dozen feet outside the cave, Malfoy spoke. "Look, Potter... yesterday I got an owl from an old friend of my father and my grandfather. He's someone who's always looked out for me over the years."

Chapter 11

Harry's Horcrux

Harry sat up quickly. "Malfoy? What happened?"

Malfoy was sitting on the floor in a corner of the room, legs crossed. He was staring at the ground in front of him, the Dark magic book at his side. He didn't look up when talked to. Pointing to the Pensieve he'd taken from Malfoy Manor, he said, "It's in there."

Surprised and concerned, the three exchanged glances. Harry almost asked Malfoy for more information, but the look on Malfoy's face suggested that he didn't want to be asked. Definitely not good, thought Harry. He and the others put their hands in the Pensieve.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Malfoy stood in a small open spot in some woods; there was a small shack about thirty meters away. Malfoy had a shoulder bag, no doubt containing the Dark magic book.

Ron looked at Malfoy crossly. "So, Malfoy, are you going to tell us, or are you going to wait until it's already happened to tell us what's going to happen?"

"Listen, Weasley," responded Malfoy angrily, "I already told you that I'd tell you when you needed to know, and that there was a reason for that. Now is when you need to know, so now I'm telling you."

Malfoy turned to Harry and spoke earnestly, telling the story he'd already told the trio who were watching: Dumbledore's request, how he'd been kept alive, getting the magic book out of Malfoy Manor. The three reacted with shock, horror, and sadness as Malfoy explained that while Dumbledore would probably not be rational now, he had expressed these wishes when he was.

"Are you absolutely sure that this is what he wanted Harry to do?" pressed Hermione.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "There's now a Pensieve back in our tent. If you want, we can Apparate back there and I can put the memory in there for you to see. Or, you can take my word for it."

Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance, neither sure how to answer. "I'll take your word for it, Malfoy," said Harry. "Like you said, it's like what he said to me on the river. It's something he would do. How does it work?"

Malfoy reached into the bag and pulled out a thin, foot-long cylindrical piece of metal whose shape reminded Harry of a flute. There were intricate designs on the surface, and it was hollow, with slightly extruding apertures at each end. Malfoy took out his wand and put it into one of the ends. He pointed it in Harry's direction.

"This device, which Professor Dumbledore gave me, can detect a Horcrux. It is also, according to this book—and Dumbledore thought as well, once he heard the book existed—what will be used to get that out of you and into him. You stand facing him, so close your foreheads are touching. I apply this to the back of your head, do an incantation, and the Horcrux will move through your forehead at the spot where yours touches his. Then he'll have it.

"The book says it should take no more than fifteen seconds, probably less than that. There'll be some discomfort, maybe a sharp pain, but that should be about it. The important thing, Potter, is that you don't really have to do anything. Just touch your forehead to his, and I'll do the rest. Any questions?"

"Why his forehead?" asked Hermione. "Is that in the book?"

"The book says that the spot on Potter's body that we need is the 'entry point' of the Horcrux. I assume there's no doubt in anyone's mind that the scar is it?" Ron and Hermione nodded in agreement, then Harry did as well. "Good," said Malfoy. "Now, we're going in. Just remember, Potter, that whatever he looks like or sounds like now, this was what he wanted. Now, you're okay to do this, right?"

Harry took a deep breath, and nodded solemnly. They walked toward the shack, and Malfoy opened the door.

On the bed was Professor Dumbledore, but not the man in any way Harry remembered him. His long hair and beard had been cut off; his beard was short, as was his hair. He wore only a pair of short pants and a T-shirt, and was emaciated, bruises visible on his legs and arms, as well as some cuts. He seemed to be sleeping, but was sometimes jerking and twisting on the bed, as if he could get no rest sleeping. Standing in the corner of the shack was Dobby, with several bandages and no small amount of bruises himself. He smiled on seeing Harry, but was clearly unhappy with the circumstances.

Malfoy spoke to the three in a whisper. "As you can see, Dobby's been through a lot, trying to take care of him. He can't clean him, except by force. He won't eat anything unless I do the Imperius Curse on him, and even then, Dobby says he throws up half the time. The unicorn blood, no doubt."

He turned to Dumbledore. "Professor," he said, "there's someone here to see you." Dumbledore snarled and muttered something incoherent.

"Professor!" shouted Malfoy.

Dumbledore leaped up with surprising agility and reached for Malfoy's throat; Malfoy was able to fend him off with Dobby's help. "My jailer returns!" spat Dumbledore, enraged. "Kill me, or I will kill you!"

Holding Dumbledore by the shoulders, Malfoy turned to Harry. "Potter, are you ready?"

Numbly, Harry nodded. "Granger, Weasley, hold him firmly," said Malfoy, slowly releasing his grip as Ron and Hermione took over for him. Malfoy quickly took out his wand, speaking as he did. "I'm going to give him a calming spell, and that's our chance. It wears off quickly, a minute or two at the most, and can't be done again anytime soon. Right after I calm him, we do this. Got it?"

Holding a struggling Dumbledore, Ron and Hermione nodded, as did Harry. Malfoy cast the calming spell; Dumbledore stopped struggling. Harry quickly moved into position, moving his forehead close to

Dumbledore's. His nose wrinkled, no doubt noticing the old man's foul breath, as Dobby couldn't enforce all aspects of personal hygiene.

Malfoy stood behind Harry, extension on his wand touching the back of Harry's head. "Granger, tell me when their foreheads are touching, at his scar!"

Hermione took Harry's head in her hands, moved it a little, and turned to Malfoy. "Touching!" Malfoy began the incantations.

Dumbledore, eyes dull just a second ago, looked up. "Harry," he mumbled, but his eyes lit up, and just for a second, the old affection he had for Harry could easily be seen. Harry was clearly affected; his eyes seemed to moisten, showing affection and pity.

Malfoy cast the spell, and after a few seconds, an orange spot started to become visible on Harry's forehead at the point of the scar, growing brighter and brighter by the second. Harry winced in pain, but stayed where he was.

Ten seconds later, it was apparent that something was wrong; the orange spot was getting brighter still, and Harry started to cry out in pain. Malfoy continued to repeat the incantations as Harry's pain soon escalated to such agony that he could no longer stand; he twisted away and fell to the ground, screaming, his forehead a bright orange, especially at the point of the scar.

"Harry!" cried Dumbledore, apparently still in command of his faculties, bending down to look at Harry. But as he bent, he lost his balance and collapsed, landing partly on the screaming Harry. Ron and Hermione pulled Dumbledore off and looked at Malfoy.

"What happened?" shouted Hermione, trying to make herself heard over Harry's screaming.

"I don't know!" shouted a bewildered Malfoy. "Let me try the calming spell on him!" Malfoy pointed the wand at Harry, now minus the attachment, and cast a spell, but it seemed to do little good. Harry's pain appeared not to have lessened at all.

“Malfoy!” shouted Ron in anger. “What the hell did you do?”

“I did exactly what I was supposed to do! It should have worked!” Both the fury at being accused and the dismay at the spell having failed were clear on his face. “Potter! Can you hear me?” Giving no recognition that he’d heard Malfoy, Harry continued screaming.

“Let’s get him back to the tent,” said Hermione, touching Harry and Disapparating, as Ron and Malfoy also disappeared.

Hermione pointed her wand at Harry and Stunned him. To the surprise of all, Harry didn’t go unconscious; he appeared to be half-conscious, and moaned loudly in pain. She looked at Malfoy. “The book didn’t say anything about this possibly happening?”

Malfoy shook his head. “Not a word! From beginning to end, exactly as it said! Look at it if you want.”

He handed the book to Hermione, who opened it at the bookmark. She took a few minutes to read it, then closed it and handed it back to Malfoy. “He’s right, Ron. He did exactly what it said. It should have worked.”

“Then why didn’t it?” asked Ron, still emotional over Harry’s condition.

“I don’t know,” said Hermione anxiously, “but that’s not the important thing right now. We have to figure out what to do! Obviously any hospital is out—“

“What about Muggle hospitals?” asked Ron, as Harry continued to scream noiselessly.

“They wouldn’t know what to do, and it would—wait, that’s it! I’ll be back.” She touched her wand, and Disapparated.

The memory shifted ahead to Hermione’s return. She was holding a small plastic bag she hadn’t had when she left. She knelt and produced a hypodermic needle encased in plastic and a small glass vial.

“What’s that?” asked Ron.

“A Muggle drug called morphine, a painkiller. Very powerful, and very dangerous,” she said as she prepared the hypodermic.

“How do you know how much to give him?”

“I asked a doctor what a safe dose was, then gave him a Memory Charm. I more or less knew already, just wanted to make sure.” She looked at the needle one last time, asked Ron to roll up Harry’s sleeve, and gave him the shot. A minute later, he was unconscious.

Using her wand, Hermione checked his condition. “He’s okay,” she said. “Looks like the amount was right.”

Malfoy spoke. “How long will that drug affect him?”

“I think, about 24 hours. I have enough for another shot, if it’s necessary. I hope it won’t be.”

“Why?” asked Ron.

“Because this drug is not only powerful, it’s addictive,” she explained. “The more you take, the more negative effects there are when you stop. Even two doses are hard to recover from. I don’t like it, but... it’s better than the alternative.”

Ron nodded vigorously. “I’d say so, yeah.”

The memory ended, and the three took their hands out of the Pensieve. Malfoy appeared not to have moved at all while they’d been watching the scene. No one spoke for a minute.

Finally, Malfoy did. “Granger,” he said tonelessly. “Pick up the book, look at the section bookmarked. Read it carefully, and see if you can figure out what went wrong.”

Hermione opened the book and read through the section, taking about ten minutes. Harry and Ron sat quietly.

“There’s nothing obviously wrong,” she said, her voice more quiet than usual. “What we saw in the Pensieve seems to match what’s here; there was nothing wrong with the incantation, for example.

“But if I had to pick a likely reason, it would be this,” she went on, putting her finger under one particular line. “It says, ‘the recipient thus desiring to receive the Horcrux, and the giver thus desiring to give the Horcrux...’ This may be the problem.” Malfoy looked at her quizzically, and clearly, neither Harry nor Ron understood.

“The word ‘desire’ is unusual in this kind of situation,” she explained. “Normally we’d use a word like ‘wishing,’ or we’d say, ‘the person giving the Horcrux,’ instead of ‘desiring to give.’ Now, this text is very old, over two hundred years, and the language and usage has changed, so it could be ascribed to that. But I’ve read enough spellbooks to know that it probably isn’t that.

“What I believe is that the word ‘desire’ is not just a flowery word, but is meant to be taken literally. That the giver and receiver must actively desire to give and receive the Horcrux, and that if that active desire isn’t there, then the transition won’t work.”

Malfoy was still confused. “Do you mean that Dumbledore didn’t desire it enough, because of his mental condition? Because this was his idea, he knew what his condition would be—“

“Oh, my God,” Harry interrupted, his mouth open in shock, the answer having come to him in a burst of inspiration that he was certain was not wrong. “It wasn’t Dumbledore, Malfoy, it was me. My counterpart. He didn’t actively desire to give it.”

“What??” exclaimed Malfoy in disbelief.

Hermione nodded solemnly. “Yes, exactly. It has to be.”

Harry’s manner was somber as well. “You see, Malfoy, I, and my counterpart, cared about Dumbledore. I respected him, looked up to him, thought he was a great man. I still do. Now, if I imagine that I suddenly learn that he’s been kept alive—by his own request, I know—in a way that would horrify most people, that he’s suffered so

much just to do this thing for me... it would be very difficult to accept all at once. My mind would be reeling. And it's going to be the last time I see him, and I know that. All kinds of emotions would be going through my mind.

"There's a difference between what you know and what you feel. Rationally, I would know that I should do this, and my counterpart agreed. But in the memory, I could see his ambivalence. He felt sorry for Dumbledore, and he felt guilty that Dumbledore should suffer this for him. So, he was in a very emotional state, and though he agreed to do this, he didn't 'actively desire' to do it. Some part of him didn't want to, because it would be like killing Dumbledore. It's not rational, and he would know that, but he would feel it anyway. So... the spell didn't work."

Malfoy looked at Hermione. "That's what you think."

She nodded. "Yes."

"If," Malfoy asked her, "you had been asked to look through this before it was done and identify any possible problems, would you have noticed this?"

She hesitated. "It's after the fact now, and it's impossible to say for sure—"

"Damn it, Granger," cut in Malfoy, glaring at her, "I want your best guess, and I want an honest answer. Would you have noticed?"

She sighed and looked down, glancing up occasionally. "Almost certainly. I always look for odd words in the instructions, and I'm pretty sure I would have understood what it meant."

Malfoy closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "Unbelievable," he muttered. He got to his feet and walked out of the tent.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at each other, but again, no one spoke for the moment. A few seconds later they heard shouting; Harry wondered for a second what it was, then realized it was Malfoy, letting loose a string of curses.

"That's pretty much how I'd feel," agreed Ron.

Harry looked at Hermione. "What do you think is going to happen with him? The other me?"

She shook her head sadly. "I couldn't even begin to guess, since this is so unprecedented. I really think even a veteran Healer wouldn't be able to say. Best case would be that over a short time, the Horcrux gets less inflamed, and he recovers. Or, it slowly works its way back to its former location. Worst case, nothing changes, and he's like this for the rest of his life. Or anything in between."

"Well," said Ron, "if he doesn't get better fairly soon, the answer is for someone else to take it from him. I would if I could."

She nodded. "Me too. But yes, it has to be someone from this dimension. And keep in mind that he wouldn't want to give it to us any more than he'd want to give it to Dumbledore."

"Yeah, good point," he reluctantly agreed. "I can't believe that's what stopped it. You know, if it'd been me, I'd have done the same damn thing as Malfoy."

Harry shook his head. "One difference."

"You mean, I'd have asked her," said Ron, gesturing to Hermione. "You told us what he said last switch, about how we mindlessly follow her. And then this happens. Bet he's kicking himself."

After a few minutes, Harry stood and walked outside, looking for Malfoy. Randomly wandering around, he finally found him about a hundred yards from the campsite. Malfoy was sitting on a rock; clearly having heard Harry coming, he didn't look up. "Save it, Potter."

Harry was slightly confused. "Just what was it you thought I was going to say?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

“Yeah, I suppose there isn’t much that would really help,” agreed Harry. “I suppose it was going to be something along the lines of, ‘everyone makes mistakes.’”

Malfoy glanced up, surprised. “Not, ‘I told you so?’”

Harry grunted. “I’m not really inclined to get on my high horse when other people make mistakes, since I’ve made so many myself, and my biggest ones were worse than this. My godfather died in part because I ran off without thinking. Hermione got tortured at Malfoy Manor because I mentioned what’s-his-name even after I knew I wasn’t supposed to. Those are the biggest ones, but there have been others.”

“Just because you make mistakes doesn’t mean I should.”

Harry leaned against the nearest tree. “No, but... the previous Auror Leaders left lots of documents, advice, other things for their successors. For future Leaders’ eyes only. One thing that most of them say is that everyone makes mistakes, it can’t be avoided. We’re human. One of them said, ‘A much bigger sin than making a mistake is not learning from it.’ If you deny your mistake, or try to blame it on someone else, you won’t learn from it, and are more likely to do it again. They put a big premium on learning from mistakes, because—

“When the Auror Leader makes a mistake, it’s very costly,” Malfoy finished, as Harry nodded. “Makes sense.” He finally looked up at Harry. “It’s funny, Potter, you’re very different from the other one. It’s like you’re five years older.”

“I’m sure it’s from being Auror Leader,” said Harry. “There’s just an enormous amount of pressure, because of the responsibility. I took this group back in time to an isolated location because a disaster wiped out almost all the Aurors before I became Leader, and it made sense to get them up to speed quickly. But then this switching starts happening, and we have no idea how to stop it. We could end up living our lives in this reality rather than our own. So, even though I couldn’t have predicted this, no one could, I still feel responsible.

Sobers you up real quick. I study a lot more than I used to, because now it's important."

After a silence, Harry spoke again. "How's Dumbledore?"

It was clear that Malfoy had expected to be asked the question, but was no happier about it. "He's dead," said Malfoy quietly, looking down. "Dobby said it was only a few hours after that happened." Malfoy shook his head. "It's amazing. It's like he held on for as long as he had to, to do that..." Malfoy trailed off, and Harry could hear the unspoken 'and I failed him' in the tone. He might have asked another question about Dumbledore, but given Malfoy's feelings, he decided to shelve the topic.

There was another silence. "So, what do we do now?" asked Malfoy.

"Good question. For now, I'd say we wait to see how this Harry does. There wasn't much you guys could do for him, but on the island, Cho is a Healer trainee, along with us for medical reasons, so her counterpart is on the island with him now. She won't know what to do, but she should be able to keep him comfortable, and teach your Hermione how to do it on this side. He may recover naturally. If he doesn't, then we may have to settle for trying to kill what's-his-name even though a Horcrux exists."

"But wait," said Malfoy. "What if—and I suspect you'll say 'I don't know, we should ask Hermione'—what if we get all the Horcruxes except the one in Potter, and he's on the other side when the Dark Lord dies? Would that be enough to keep him from coming back?"

Harry nodded thoughtfully; he hadn't thought of that, and now felt that he should've. With a straight face, he said, "I don't know. We should ask Hermione."

"Very funny, Potter."

Now, Harry grinned. "I try. Seriously, I don't think she'll know; I think this is unknowable. But we always ask her anyway, because you never know what weird thing she'll know that you could never have predicted. It's an interesting thought, and it is possible that it'll come

down to banking on that. My feeling is that killing him without dealing with the Horcruxes isn't preferable in general, but it is preferable to not killing him at all."

"Can't disagree with that," mused Malfoy. "But of course, the question is, how? He's incredibly powerful, so unless being Auror Leader gives you some special power to beat him, I don't think you could."

Harry shook his head. "Nothing I can think of."

"That reminds me," said Malfoy. "Look, Potter... I realize that not asking Granger wasn't my only mistake; I also should've given Potter more time to deal with what I was telling him—"

"Dumbledore told you not to—"

"Yeah, but I don't think he meant, don't tell him until the very last second. I should have done it differently. But I understand that both of those mistakes were made because I had information I didn't want to share. With the book, it was like, this is my family's book, and only I look at it. With Potter, it was that I didn't want to have to listen to his and the others' reactions, and telling them at the last minute would minimize that. But I kept too much information.

"Now, you have Auror Leader powers that I don't know; you told me two because you had to, and then later, the Apparating anywhere one. But it occurs to me that we may miss another opportunity because I don't know what you can do, and if I did, I might be able to think of something that you didn't. I know there are reasons not to tell me, or anyone. But I think you should."

Harry thought about it, and decided that Malfoy was right. He also appreciated that Malfoy was trying to be honest, and criticizing himself definitely didn't come easily to Malfoy. "Most of these powers require me to concentrate, to really focus. Let's see... enhanced sight, as well as the hearing. Can withstand Cruciatus-levels of pain."

Malfoy whistled, impressed. "That must be helpful."

“Fortunately, haven’t had much occasion to use it. Let’s see... can know if someone’s about to pull out his wand, I think it’s like animals know when the other animal is going to attack. Can see magic—oh, wait, you already know that one. So, that’s it. If there are others, I don’t know about them.”

“Interesting. I wonder why it gives you those particular powers. I mean, they’re nice, but there are wizards who can do those things. They’re not superhuman.”

“I think they wouldn’t give me those things if they were superhuman. They don’t want to make it too easy.”

Malfoy frowned. “Who’s ‘they?’”

“Sorry, couldn’t tell you if I tried. Some things I’m not allowed to say, like a Forgetfulness spell. I just end up looking like an idiot. ‘um, uh, um, I, um...’”

Malfoy grinned. “I’ll take your word for that. Auror Leaders like their secrets, huh?”

“It seems so.”

“I know you said it depends on how fast Potter recovers, but let’s say he doesn’t recover fast. Plan for the worst. In that case, what do you think we should do?”

“Kingsley, my Kingsley, talked about the possibility of going out in the open as Auror Leader and getting the Aurors to follow me. If they did, I would have a lot better position to operate from.”

Malfoy looked thoughtful. “That works in some ways, but not in others. You see, the key aspect of the current political situation is that the government is pretending that they aren’t controlled by Dark wizards, when of course they are. Doing what you’re talking about would put the politicians and bureaucrats on the spot. If you only arrested Dark wizards, they wouldn’t object, unless they were pressured to do so. If you stuck your nose into the Ministry, you’d make a lot of enemies.”

“All I have to do is make one person disappear, and not be too subtle about it. They wouldn’t fight me after that.”

Malfoy’s eyebrows rose high. “I’m surprised you’d do that. But then, it depends on who they fear more, you or the Dark wizards. The problem is that even if you got rid of a couple, they still might say, ‘Potter can get me fired, but the Dark wizards can get me dead.’ The Dark wizards would hide, but still control the government.”

“Thicknesse is under the Imperius Curse,” responded Harry. “I could release him from it, and if that doesn’t help, get rid of him. If I’m strong enough, the Council would appoint someone I like rather than someone the Dark wizards like.”

“I didn’t know that about Thicknesse, but I’m sure it’s widely suspected. So then the best case is that a pro-Potter Minister is installed, Muggle-borns get their wands back, and life goes on as it did before the government fell. What would the Dark wizards do? Probably go on a rampage of violence, targeted especially at Muggle-borns and their sympathizers, people like the Weasleys. They’d rather control the government, but if they can’t, they’ll make people they don’t like suffer. They’d also try to keep influence in the Ministry by terrorizing bureaucrats. In the end, you have to get the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters, because they’re the source of the problem.”

“The other thing I was thinking about,” said Harry, “was trying to get the public on our side. Get the word out that what’s-his-name is controlling the government, and get people to rise up against him.”

Malfoy loudly scoffed. “Yeah, right, Potter. Amazing how you can talk about manipulating the government one minute, and then sound so naïve the next. The people don’t want to hear about it! They want to get on with their lives. They don’t want to fight this enemy they can’t see but you tell them is there. One thing I’ve learned is that most people take the path of least resistance. A few people would jump on your bandwagon, but most would try not to get involved.”

Harry was dubious. “You really think so?”

Malfoy's tone left no doubt that he was sure he was right. "Why do you think, Potter, that the Dark Lord is lying low? Why he hasn't shown his face? Eighteen years ago some people, like your father, opposed him, as well as the Aurors. He was around, he was killing, and everyone knew it. It couldn't be denied.

"This time, he seems to have learned a lesson from that. He hasn't been letting the Death Eaters kill anyone, except in special cases, like he wanted me to kill Dumbledore. But it's not out in the open. He knows—I mean, I don't directly know that he thinks this, but I can guess—that as long as he keeps out of sight, and Death Eaters don't go on killing sprees, people will pretend he isn't back even though the evidence is that he is back. Look at what Fudge did! That's all you need to know. "

"But if I told people, maybe had some evidence, then they couldn't ignore it any more."

Shaking his head, Malfoy responded, "They'd find reasons, excuses, like Fudge did. They'd remember those attacks the Prophet did, that you're mentally unstable. They'd point to the lack of public attacks. One thing I learned growing up was that you can use people's weaknesses to manipulate them, and people don't want to hear bad news. Give them a reason to ignore it, and they will. Yeah, you're the Boy Who Lived, and some would join up. But a lot, I think most, would tell themselves some lie—which the Prophet, under Dark control, would spread—so they didn't have to face the truth. I can't be positive, but I'm pretty sure."

Harry thought about it. "I find myself not wanting to agree with you, even though I have no good arguments to make against what you said."

"See? That proves my point. You want to believe what you want to believe. You want people to fight against him, because his number one priority is to see you dead. But who's to say that if you had no connection to him, that you'd be willing to fight him?"

“My dad fought him,” Harry protested. “And he had no special connection. Others did too.”

“Okay, that’s true,” Malfoy conceded. “Some did, but most were busy keeping their heads down, too scared to do anything. I don’t mean you’d get no support, and you would do better than anyone else could, because of your scar. I’m just saying that as a strategic goal, counting on a mass uprising is an extremely risky thing to do. I think 80% of the people who would follow you would be Gryffindors. And let’s not forget, people who supported you publicly—and this was the case eighteen years ago as well—would have a short life expectancy.”

Harry sighed. “Well, this is all very depressing.”

Malfoy shrugged. “The truth hurts. Both for you, and for me.”

“How did you learn so much about this kind of thing?”

Malfoy paused before answering. “The Sorting Hat always talked about how Slytherins are ambitious, but the real word, which it doesn’t use, is power. Slytherins want power, and they learn what it takes to get it, to wield it. My father was very good at that, and he taught me well. He would talk at great length about how he manipulated Fudge, which he admitted was no great challenge, and others in the Ministry. Say what people want to hear, and they’ll be with you. Know and exploit your opponents’ weaknesses. Project power, and you’ll have power. Use fear, because people will act on their fears but not admit that they’re doing it, so they can’t catch you at what you’re doing. Use money, because people want it. Make people think it’s to their benefit to support you, and they will. I can see that this depresses you more, but believe me, it works. I had a lot of power at Hogwarts, which I got by applying what my father taught me. If the Dark Lord hadn’t come back, a plum entry-level position in the Ministry would have been mine for the asking after I left Hogwarts, if I’d wanted it. This is reality, Potter, and if you’re going to be Auror Leader, you need to learn it, and fast.”

“Some of it I already knew, but it’s never been put to me quite like that. I guess it’s that on my side, I don’t need to worry about it that much. I’m Auror Leader, defeated what’s-his-name, am extremely

popular, and the Dark wizards are on the run. The Ministry wouldn't dare refuse anything I asked. But over here it's much tougher, because this Harry hasn't defeated what's-his-name and isn't Auror Leader. He's still a possibly unbalanced and attention-seeking teenager. All the adulation and support will come after defeating what's-his-name, and by then, I'll need it a lot less."

"That sounds right," agreed Malfoy.

"So, you think political manipulation, and going after Dark wizards directly, is the way to go."

"Especially the second, but yes. Now, that's not to say that you should give up on the general population. If there's a good chance, you should let them know that Dark wizards are there, if only to keep them on the defensive publicly. Always keep the enemy on the defensive, that's another important principle. Identify pressure points, and use them for maximum effect at the right time."

Harry was reminded of the lessons he'd learned about chess from the master after leaving Japan. Malfoy's last two sentences, he realized, could be equally applied to chess.

"As for the Dark wizards, you need to take them out of the game every chance you get," Malfoy went on. "No more leaving them behind like you did when you rescued Lovegood."

"Yeah. But what to do with them?"

Malfoy grunted. "What Granger and Thomas came up with is diabolical, more than they know. Death Eaters would fear that worse than death if they knew it was possible. But I heard Granger saying that you can only do it so many times until there's a danger of the Muggles finding out that something is up. Now, I do have one idea you might not have thought of..."

An hour later, Harry stood at the mouth of the new 'cave' that he, Ron, and Hermione had excavated with the Reductor Curse. "Good enough, you think?" he asked Kingsley.

The older man nodded. "Put a few tapestries on the walls, it'll seem like home."

"I'll have to talk to Kitterman about that," joked Harry. "So, we can do a Fidelius Charm on this, right? It doesn't have to be a house?"

"No, a hole in the side of a hill is just fine for that."

"Okay. It has to be your Fidelius Charm, because you're of this dimension, and not switching. And someone in this dimension has to be Secret-Keeper. Did you have anyone in mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." He took out a mirror, spoke into it briefly, and put it away. A few seconds later, a familiar figure Apparated in.

Harry's face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Remus!" Mixed with his pleasure at seeing his friend again was the recollection that the one in his dimension was no more. He walked over and wrapped Lupin in a strong hug.

Lupin returned it with a grin, but his eyes showed his concern for Harry. "It's good to see you, Harry, though it hasn't been that long, from my point of view. Kingsley's told me your story, what you told him. Quite remarkable. But I'm guessing from your reaction that where you come from, I didn't make it."

Harry shook his head sadly. "You and Tonks both died in the final battle."

Lupin nodded slowly. "We knew the risks. At least we went out together," he said philosophically. Gesturing to Kingsley, he asked, "What about him?"

"He became Minister."

Kingsley's eyes went wide; Lupin laughed out loud. "Well, you didn't get off easily either," he joked to Kingsley.

"Why didn't you mention that?" Kingsley asked Harry indignantly.

"It didn't seem relevant," Harry replied. "But speaking of Secret-Keepers, I've decided I'm going to Apparate into Grimmauld Place. It would be really nice to have a place to stay."

"You don't think there are Dark wizards there?" asked Remus. "I heard what happened."

"I think if there are, I can take them. I'll come in with the Cloak."

"I want to go with you," said Hermione emphatically. "There should be another person there."

Harry hesitated, not wanting to put another person at risk, but he knew she was right. "Okay."

"We should get Luna here," suggested Ron. "You may want to communicate with us through her."

Harry looked up without moving his head. "Luna, could you come to where we are?"

"Sure," he heard her reply in his head. "Just let me tell my father."

A few seconds later, she was there. "Hello, Professor Lupin," she said cheerfully.

Lupin grinned. "Hello, Luna. It's been a long time since I've been called that." Looking at her necklace, his eyes narrowed. "Isn't that the—oh, that's how you were communicating! Well, that's nice, I'm happy for you two."

"You've heard of it too?" asked Harry in surprise.

"Of course, most people have," said Lupin. "I was aware that Dumbledore had it. It's always intrigued me, because of my connection to the moon. Which Luna has as well, of course. Did you know that the shape of your necklaces changes as the moon does?"

"No, I didn't know that. Pretty neat." He looked at Hermione, put his left arm around her shoulder, and threw the Cloak over them.

"You're going for the bedroom, right?" she asked.

"Right. Ready?"

"Ready."

He willed himself to suddenly appear in the bedroom in which he'd slept for a few months... and nothing happened. He tried again.

"Are they gone?" he heard Ron say. "I didn't hear the noise."

"No, still here," said Harry from under the Cloak. "I'll try one more time." Again, he failed.

"Let me try," she suggested, putting her right arm around him. A few seconds later, she took the Cloak off of them. "I couldn't do it either."

Ron looked mystified. "Well, that doesn't make any sense. Could the house not be there anymore?"

"Then he'd go to the spot where the house used to be," said Kingsley.

"Could a new Fidelius Charm have been put on it?" asked Ron.

Lupin shook his head. "Whoever may have access to the house now, ownership hasn't changed; it's still Harry's. Even if the house is full of Dark wizards, they can't do a new one. There should be absolutely nothing stopping Harry from entering."

"Remus," said Kingsley. "Let's you and I try." Lupin nodded.

"Okay, but take the Cloak," suggested Harry. They put it on, and a few seconds later, Harry heard the Disapparation sound. Harry exchanged quizzical looks with Ron and Hermione.

A minute later, to Harry's shock, Kingsley and Lupin were back, but not just the two of them. "Kreacher!" exclaimed Harry.

Kreacher regarded Harry with great suspicion. "You looks like Harry Potter, but you is not Kreacher's master." Kreacher immediately disappeared.

"What the hell...?" Harry looked around in amazement. "Hermione?"

"Ah, I get it," said Lupin.

As Harry turned to look at Lupin, Hermione spoke. "Yes, I see, too. You see, Harry, you are Harry Potter, but you're not his Harry Potter. So as far as he's concerned, you're not his master. Somehow, he knows, which is why he didn't come when you called him two days ago.

"This also explains why you can't get into Grimmauld Place. Your own magic works fine, but any previously existing magic that links this dimension's Harry Potter to anything else in this dimension, like the Fidelius Charm linking him to Grimmauld Place, or the link in the relationship with Kreacher, doesn't work for you. For me or Ron, or anyone on the island."

Harry shook his head in annoyance. "It's always something. Kingsley, Remus, no Dark wizards in the house?"

"We took a quick walk through, didn't see any," said Kingsley. "No evidence that the place has been lived in, or infiltrated. But we can't know for sure, of course."

"At least you could live there, if you wanted to," suggested Ron. "If you were sure that it was secure."

Unhappily, Kingsley said, "I wish we could, but given how long it's been empty... for all we know, they could send someone in to check occasionally at 3 a.m., see if we came back, catch us sleeping. Probably that wouldn't happen, but it would be a risk. I'll think about it, at least."

"Okay, now the next thing," said Harry, looking around at everyone. He pointed to a spot a few miles away. "See that hill? I've already checked it out, it's safe. I want everyone to Apparate there."

After they arrived, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna Apparated to various places to gather Dean, Justin, Malfoy, and to Harry's surprise, Colin. Harry greeted him with a warm handshake. "Colin, it's great to see you."

Colin smiled, but Harry sensed a little discomfort. "I guess I'm looking better than the last time you saw me."

"Yeah," Harry agreed somberly. "Well, I think one of you will be okay. Everybody, make your Portkey."

A minute later, all had. "Be ready to grab your Portkey when I give the word. Ready?"

"Ready," a chorus of voices responded.

Harry raised his voice, even though he knew it didn't matter how loudly he said it. "Voldemort!"

About five seconds later, three rumpled-looking men in casual clothes Apparated in, wands at the ready, and promptly went down under a barrage of Stunning Spells. "That was easy," remarked Ron, as Kingsley and Lupin wrapped the men in magical ropes and moved them off to the side.

Harry had wondered if others might come, but no one did. They moved the three captives to the mouth of the new cave after taking their wands, and set up ten minutes later in a new location. Harry said the word again, and this time four men came out, and again were quickly subdued and captured.

"None of them were anybody important," remarked Malfoy on looking them over. "No Death Eaters, just Knockturn Alley lowlives."

"Hired goons," suggested Ron.

Malfoy shrugged. "Basically. I wouldn't waste the effort of keeping them. Granger, what were you and Thomas going to do with them?"

“Give them strong Memory Charms, try to make them forget they’re wizards, and scatter them in rundown Muggle areas, make them look like street people. The Memory Charms won’t work completely—it’s too much information to erase—but they’ll be so disoriented that it’ll be hard for them to get back.”

Kingsley looked around as he spoke, as if he expected more to pop in at any moment. “The best thing about this is that the kind of person who does this isn’t exactly brave. It’ll get around that these men didn’t get back, and the Dark wizards will find it more and more difficult to recruit people.”

“We doing more?” asked Ron.

Hermione shook her head. “It’ll take Dean and I quite a while to get rid of these ones. We shouldn’t do any more today.”

Harry looked at Kingsley. “Next time we do this, how many will come?”

“Either zero, or fifteen.”

“Makes sense,” agreed Harry. A thought occurred to him, and he grinned.

“What?” asked Kingsley.

“It felt good to say his name.”

Kingsley nodded. “I’ll bet.”

Five hours later, Harry was sitting at the table, back on the island; they had come back a half hour ago, and he had just finished telling them the story about what had happened to the other Harry. Kingsley and Hestia already knew, of course, having been told by Ron and Hermione’s counterparts.

“So, Kingsley,” said Harry, “How is he?”

"We decided to put him into a kind of artificial coma. Their Cho, unfortunately, doesn't have nearly as much medical training as ours does," he said, glancing at Cho. "She didn't feel comfortable making decisions like that on her own. Hestia and I do have some medical knowledge, as will all of you by the time you become Aurors. This is one of those situations where his body's going to do what it's going to do, and we can't do anything about it. That's the problem with doing such an obscure spell as Malfoy tried to do. There's no precedent of treatment to follow if it goes wrong."

"So it looks like they'll be keeping him in the cave that we made," added Harry, who went on to update everyone on the cave's status. "Luna and her father will also be staying there, and basically anyone who doesn't have a place to stay. Colin says he's going to work on getting some furniture in there, and Luna mentioned the possibility of moving some bigger things from her house. Next switch, I'll go there and check it. Probably it'll be empty, but you never know if they'll use it as a hideout, an outpost, or something."

"Is it really worth taking even that small risk, to check that?" asked Corner. "I mean, I know you can handle yourself, but furniture can be gotten other ways."

Harry shrugged. "To be honest, I wouldn't mind picking off another two or three, if they're there. The combination of the Cloak and Auror Leader enhancements make it very easy for me to sneak up on people."

"Just don't get complacent," warned Ron.

"Actually," said Kingsley, "I was going to suggest that we establish a specific procedure for when Harry goes on solo operations. Luna being able to get his view is very useful. There should be a group on standby, ready to go in for a rescue, and the possibility should be planned for. I'll develop it over the next day, and have you let my counterpart know, see what he thinks."

"He should approve, since he's you," Ron pointed out wryly.

“Probably, but you don’t want to take these things for granted,” said Kingsley. “I’m sure I would appreciate the consideration.”

Harry turned to Neville and Seamus. “How are things at Hogwarts?”

Neville grinned. “Getting rid of the Carrows was really, really good for morale. Anthony said it was all anybody talked about the day after it happened.”

“I probably shouldn’t have done this,” said Terry, “but in Potions, I taunted Goyle about the Carrows being gone. Goyle did this stupid thing where he intentionally bumped me as I passed him—“

“He does that all the time now,” cut in Seamus. “He wants to start an argument, hoping that the Carrows would let him do the Cruciatus Curse on whoever it was if they fought back. Really ticks me off.”

“Yeah, I felt sorry for you guys, you had the Slytherins in Defense Against the Dark Arts. I just got snide with him, told him to watch where he was going. He pulled his wand on me, and looked over to Slughorn, as if that was going to help him. I said, ‘Carrows are gone, Goyle. You miss your mummy and daddy?’ He hit me with the Curse, but as soon as he did, three other Ravenclaws opened up on him with Stunners, and he went down. Crabbe and Nott pulled their wands, and Slughorn told everyone to calm down. Crabbe and Nott didn’t even bother to Enervate Goyle, and he spent the rest of the lesson unconscious. If the Carrows had been there, I’d have definitely ended up in detention from Carrow, for some made-up reason, and Goyle would have been there too.”

Ron grunted. “Maybe you need to get Crabbe and Goyle out of there.”

Harry nodded, but said nothing. His impulse was to say to those who were at Hogwarts that they should try to stay out of trouble, not to draw attention to themselves, for fear of interrogations that could yield information he didn’t want getting out. He didn’t, though, because he knew it must have been difficult to be there that year, and he didn’t want to tell those who had to endure it what they should and shouldn’t do. “So, Slughorn didn’t do anything?”

"No, we were surprised," said Padma. "Except for telling everyone to calm down, he just pretended it didn't happen. I think he doesn't like the torture, but doesn't want to discipline the Slytherins too much. In the current atmosphere, it's almost like the Slytherins are in charge, and they know it. But as Terry said, it's so much better now that the Carrows are gone. So, thanks for that."

"But yeah, I think Ron's idea wasn't bad," added Terry. "I mean, I wouldn't mind seeing Goyle trying to pee on some Muggle policeman's shoes."

This provoked loud laughter, as everyone remembered the scene they'd viewed in the Pensieve. "Now, now," joked Ron, "let's not be so mean to the poor Muggle policemen. They have a dangerous job."

"I guess so," said Seamus, "if people are always trying to pee on their shoes."

"That doesn't actually happen, though, does it?" asked Neville.

Seamus laughed. "I don't think so, Neville," he said, patting Dean on the back. "Only in Dean's fevered imagination."

Harry steered the topic back to the most recent switch, and soon discovered that nothing else important had occurred. He called the meeting to a close, and went back to his tent. He could still hear joking going on at the table; he supposed people needed some humor in difficult times.

A few minutes later his door opened, and Luna entered. He smiled. "How are you doing?"

"Okay. I'm glad my father is someplace safe. But I came here to see how you were doing." She sat next to him on the sofa and took his hand.

He shrugged. "All right, I suppose. Why?"

“Well, I know how much pressure there is on you, in general. And it feels like somehow the other Harry’s situation puts even more pressure on you. And if they could have gotten the Horcrux out, that would have really changed the situation. But now, you have to figure out what to do.”

“I guess that’s part of being Auror Leader.”

“I guess so,” she agreed. “Is there anything I can do?”

He moved closer to her, and gently pulled her into a hug. There was something about her that made him feel better, calmer, like everything was going to be all right. “I’m glad you’re here with me,” he said quietly as they held each other.

“I am too,” she said. They stayed in that position for a short while, then she left after giving him a kiss goodbye. Afterwards, he reflected that the weight of the burden on him somehow felt a little lighter.

* * * * *

The next switch would take place the next night, at a few minutes before eleven, and continue until half past eight in the morning. Harry debated whether to take action, or simply sleep the night. He ended up deciding that it might be better to do a few things, though after talking with Kingsley, he decided not to try another ambush using Voldemort’s name as bait. “You mess them up more now by not doing it for a while, keep them guessing,” Kingsley advised.

As he expected, Harry found himself lying on his back in the new cave when the switch happened; he had taken care to be lying down just before the switch so no one would have to move his counterpart. He stood and looked around. Malfoy was sitting on the ground, back to the wall, reading the Dark spellbook. Luna and Xenophilius were sitting near each other, clearly having been talking just before the switch. Ron, Hermione, Dean, Justin, and Kingsley were also there.

Harry walked over to Luna and her father. “How are you doing, Mr. Lovegood?”

“Fine, Leader Potter, just fine,” the old man answered.

Harry felt mildly embarrassed. “Mr. Lovegood, you don’t have to—“

“The position more than merits such respect,” responded Xenophilius with obvious sincerity. “I just wish I could print the story. I wish I could print almost anything, come to think of it. It is my life’s work, and I miss it.”

“Well, we may yet be asking you to do that,” said Harry. “We have to wait until the time is right, but that printing press may become a powerful weapon for us.”

Xenophilius’s face showed that he dearly hoped it would be. “It, and I, are at your disposal.” Harry nodded, gave Luna a pat on the shoulder, and moved on to talk to Kingsley.

As he did, to his mild surprise, he heard Malfoy say, “Granger, would you come over here?” Also somewhat surprised, she did so; he gestured for her to sit next to him. He moved the book towards her so they could both see it. “Would you look over this one, see if there’s anything funny.” Harry smiled to himself, sure not to let Malfoy see.

He talked to Kingsley about the timing of the establishment of the Fidelius Charm for the cave, and the operational matters he’d discussed the day before with the other Kingsley. Kingsley agreed with his counterpart, and they discussed logistical details for about twenty minutes.

“Okay, I’m going to check in at Hogwarts, in the Room,” he announced to all present. “It shouldn’t take more than ten minutes.”

“I’ll be watching,” said Luna.

“Potter,” said Malfoy, still looking at the book with Hermione. “I want to talk to you when you get back.”

Harry nodded. “Okay.”

He Disapparated, and found himself in the Room of Requirement. To his surprise, he saw not only Neville, but also Seamus, Terry, Anthony, and Ernie. They were sitting in a circle, talking. "Hey. What's going on?"

"Our counterparts were here at the switch," explained Terry. "Apparently, there's a new DADA teacher. It's the guy you told us you ran into last year, Yaxley. And he's a real piece of work."

Damn, thought Harry. "What happened?"

"The other Seamus told me the story, asked me to tell you," said Anthony. "Yaxley arrived yesterday, and his first class was earlier today. After it finished, around lunchtime, he kept Seamus afterwards. Started asking him questions about Neville, where he went. Seamus said he didn't know. Yaxley asked what happened to you, what you were doing, and again Seamus said he didn't know. Yaxley said he didn't believe him, then Silenced him, and started doing the Cruciatus Curse on him. Not for short times, and not only once or twice. He'd keep it going for a minute or more, asking questions in between." Harry winced, imagining what Seamus had gone through. Neville had been surprisingly cavalier about the torture that had occurred last year, but judging from Neville's face now, what Anthony was describing was of a totally different character.

"Seamus said that in between the torturing, Yaxley kept asking questions," Anthony continued. "At first Seamus kept saying he didn't know, and Yaxley would keep it up. Then he started trying to invent stories, but Yaxley kept asking for details, and every time Seamus said 'I don't know,' he'd get the Curse again. He couldn't think of plausible details of the made-up stories fast enough, and Yaxley would give him a blast every time he said something that didn't make sense. Finally, after twenty minutes—Seamus only knew because he looked at the clock right afterwards, he said it felt like a lot longer—Snape came into the room to talk to Yaxley, apparently by coincidence. Snape looked at Seamus, who was on the floor, and told him to leave him and Yaxley alone. Seamus said that he was so worn down by the Curse that he wouldn't have thought he could move, but when Snape said that, he never got out of a room so fast in his life."

"I'll bet," agreed Harry somberly.

"So, Seamus came straight here, didn't even stop at the Great Hall for lunch. Said he wasn't leaving here, period. Wants to either stay in the Room to help Neville with whatever he might do, or leave and join up with Dean and Justin. He also said that when Snape came in, he was just about at the breaking point, and he thinks he might have broken down and told Yaxley the truth. He said, 'there's only so much of that you can take.'"

"I'm amazed he got through as much as he did," said Harry, feeling a cold fury at Yaxley. Looking at Seamus, he added, "All I can say is that he, you, are pretty damn tough. Anthony, please thank him profusely from me for what he did. And tell him that Yaxley's career at Hogwarts is over."

"He thought that might be the case," agreed Anthony. "He knows, we all know, what you did with the Carrows. He said, 'if Dean and Hermione decide to make Yaxley spend his life licking Muggle toilets clean, it'll still be too good for him.'"

Harry hoped that Dean and Hermione wouldn't go quite that far, but he could absolutely sympathize with the other Seamus's feelings. "I'm sure they'll think of something good. Is this known around the school?"

Anthony nodded. "Everyone in the class saw Seamus get kept behind, of course, and Seamus told me to spread it around. He hoped it wouldn't happen to anyone else."

"Now, Parvati and Lavender are the only seventh-year Gryffindors, and they'd be next in line to be questioned," said Neville. "I was going to sneak into the Gryffindor common room, go to their dormitory, and suggest that they stay here as well, not go back to classes. Parvati has said that as girls, they're at less risk, but I'm not sure how long that'll protect them. After what happened to Luna, anything's possible."

“Well, they took her because of her father,” pointed out Harry, “so it probably won’t happen to them. But you’re right, they are at risk. It probably wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

Seamus spoke. “If you made it an order, Parvati would do it, and I think Lavender would follow her.”

“Our Parvati would, but I have no authority over this dimension’s Parvati,” he said. “Sorry, but it has to be their decision. Did anything else happen?” Anthony shook his head. “Okay, then I’m going to go and deal with Yaxley. Hopefully, this time, they’ll get the message.”

“Are you going to try to make it look like something else, like you did with the Carrows?” asked Neville.

“Nope, I’m going to just take him. It seems like they didn’t get the message last time, so this time, it’s going to be a lot more emphatic. They’re going to think the jinx on the position got stronger.”

He Apparated to the same quarters he had before; Yaxley had taken his successor’s quarters. As before he was under the Cloak, and it was a simple matter of stunning him in his bed. Glancing at the door, Harry noticed a magical barrier, obviously designed to keep out nighttime intruders. It seemed that they suspected that the Carrows succumbed to foul play, but naturally, they never considered the possibility that someone might Apparate in.

Harry took Yaxley back to the cave to question him. He tried to have Dean and Hermione hypnotize him to cause him to answer questions, but unfortunately, he was able to resist the hypnosis enough that while he answered the questions, the answers were false. Harry knew they were false, but it was the best they could do with hypnosis. Putting him under the Imperius Curse also failed, as, like Harry, Yaxley was resistant to it. There was always the Veritaserum given to him by Slughorn, but there was a limited amount, and Harry was far from sure that Yaxley might have information that merited it. Finally, he decided to do so.

Yaxley revealed nothing of supreme value, but a few things that Harry and the others found interesting and useful. As in Harry’s own

dimension, Yaxley had been forced out of Grimmauld Place by Kreacher right after the Umbridge incident had happened, so Grimmauld Place had not been compromised. This meant that those who were already approved to stay there could, but no one new could be told, as one had to be outside the house first, and that was probably still being monitored. Harry was pleased to know that this dimension's Weasleys would be able to stay there.

Yaxley told Harry that the instruction to take over for Carrow at Hogwarts came from Bellatrix Lestrange, who he believed was given the order by Voldemort himself. Asked who he guessed would take over the Dark Arts position, Yaxley said he had no idea. Asked about Seamus's torture, Yaxley said it had been on his own initiative, hoping to get information about Harry that would please the Dark Lord and enhance his stature. He had planned to torture all Gryffindors, in descending order of seniority, and all seventh year Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs. Asked for information about Voldemort's whereabouts or plans, Yaxley didn't know. "Senior Death Eaters know the location of junior ones, but not vice versa," said Yaxley. He also knew of no current operations against Voldemort's enemies.

Able to think of no more questions to ask him, Harry Stunned him and wrapped him in ropes. "What do we do with him?" asked Hermione. "We can't put him with the Muggles, he's too resistant."

Harry glanced at Malfoy. "Malfoy had an idea last switch that was pretty good, which I'm leaning towards. I can Apparate him down into the Chamber of Secrets."

"Interesting," said Hermione, clearly impressed. "That's very good. I should have thought of it."

"Sorry, Granger," said Malfoy humorously, "you can't be the one to think of everything."

"Well, she tries," joked Harry. "Thing is, we need food and water. Maybe a week's worth, bring some every week. It would have to be me, of course. I could Apparate in under the Cloak, no problem."

"That would work," she agreed. "I guess there's no other way."

“Or, better yet,” suggested Ron, “Apparate into that bathroom, the one with Moaning Myrtle, open up the thing—”

“And drop food and water down, in indestructible packages! Great idea, Ron!” exclaimed Harry.

Hermione looked a little unhappy. Harry patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Hermione. You’ll have the next idea.” Malfoy laughed out loud.

“Very funny,” she said to Harry, with annoyance that Harry hoped was at least partly feigned.

“And she’ll probably have the next ten after that, knowing her,” put in Ron.

“Okay,” said Harry. “Hermione, your next project is to find out how much and what kind of food humans need to live, at the minimum possible cost.”

Dean wasn’t part of the conversation, but had been near enough to hear. “How about dog food?”

“I don’t think you can live on that,” said Hermione, wrinkling her nose in distaste at the idea.

“We could find out,” said Ron; Harry wasn’t sure whether he was joking.

“I think my mate would have no problem with that,” affirmed Dean.

“Problem is,” said Harry, “I suspect your mate would have no problem with us pinning Yaxley down and putting a five hundred-pound weight on top of him. Much as he doesn’t deserve it, we are going to follow at least basic ethics in dealing with prisoners.”

“Yeah, because they’d never treat us improperly if we were their prisoners,” said Dean.

Hermione spoke, her expression serious. "Dean, if we treat them the same as they would treat us—"

He sighed and interrupted her. "Then we're no better than them, I know. It just seems unfair."

"The price we pay for being the good guys," said Harry. "We get to sleep at night."

"Hate to tell you this, Potter," said Malfoy, "but I'm pretty sure they have no trouble sleeping."

Dean spoke before Harry had a chance. "Did you?"

Harry thought Malfoy would react angrily, but he didn't. "Yes, sometimes. That's probably why I failed."

Harry gave Malfoy a small grin. "Their loss is our gain. You know, Malfoy, I didn't mean sleep literally. And I know they don't have much in the way of consciences. They feel better because they only care about power, but we do because we're righteous. I'd rather be us than them, even if it's tougher sometimes." After a pause, he added to Hermione, "But if it turns out that a human can live on dog food..."

She couldn't help but smile. "I'll look into it. Which reminds me, we need more food."

"Couldn't we just Apparate into a closed Muggle supermarket and steal some?" asked Ron.

Hermione regarded him with what was clear was real annoyance. "Were you here, Ron? We were just talking about ethics, you know."

He rolled his eyes. "Stealing from someone who won't notice it's missing is pretty different from treating people inhumanely. And it's not as though we don't have a good reason. We're fighting for our lives, and fighting for the freedom of the wizarding world. Not to mention, fighting against those who would make slaves of Muggles."

“So it’s okay to steal from them?” she protested.

Harry held up his hands. “Okay, we’re not going to have this conversation. Hermione, I’ll ask you this. If the choices are stealing, or taking the chance of me Apparating into my Gringotts vault, which would you choose?”

Unhappy, she gave him a look that said, ‘please don’t make me choose.’ Ron nodded triumphantly, as if his point had been conclusively made.

“We can always leave them a note, and tell them we’ll pay them back later,” said Harry, not wanting to argue further. “And I’m not saying I won’t go into my vault, either, but it was a reasonable question.”

Harry now glanced at Malfoy, whose expression suggested that he found the whole discussion peculiar, but was making no comment. “Malfoy, you wanted to talk to me?”

“Yeah. Can we step outside?”

“Sure.”

A few dozen feet outside the cave, Malfoy spoke. “Look, Potter... yesterday I got an owl from an old friend of my father and my grandfather. He’s someone who’s always looked out for me over the years.” Malfoy chuckled to himself. “So to speak.”

“What do you mean, ‘so to speak?’”

“He’s blind,” explained Malfoy. “But he knows a lot. He became blind in his thirties, victim of a curse from one of his enemies. He more or less withdrew from public life after that, but he’s sharp as a tack. He could help us.”

Harry was silent, thinking. Exasperated, Malfoy exhaled. “Look, Potter, I wouldn’t be telling you this if he was some kind of Dark wizard. Trust me, he isn’t. Neither was my grandfather; he was a typical power-hungry Slytherin, but not what you’d call evil. I suspect my father wouldn’t have been either, if he hadn’t gotten mixed up with the Dark

Lord. This man—his name is Blackstone—had a falling out with my father when the Dark Lord came back. I really don't think you're going to have a problem with him."

Harry was somewhat reassured, but not completely. "Is he ethical? Wait, let me rephrase that. Is he what Hermione would consider ethical?"

Malfoy thought, then gave Harry a lopsided grin. "He's what Weasley would consider ethical."

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "That's not very reassuring," he joked.

"I'll tell Weasley you said that."

"I'm sure you will. Now, are you absolutely sure you can trust him?"

"He's my godfather," said Malfoy simply.

"Ah."

Malfoy took out the letter he'd received. "He wants to meet tonight, at the end of the main road in Hogsmeade, near the Three Trees."

Harry thought he knew what Malfoy was talking about, but wasn't sure. "Do you mean, after the road ends, those three large trees..."

With exaggerated patience, Malfoy replied, "Yes, Potter, that's what I meant when I said—"

"I just didn't know they were called that. Now I know. Can we be sure that he won't unknowingly lead you into a trap?"

Malfoy nodded. "I wouldn't think so—he'd be smarter than that—but I can't be certain. That's why I'm talking to you."

"What time do—wait a minute, you said 'tonight.' How are you going to arrange a time?"

“He said the time in his owl. 3 a.m.”

“How does he know you’ll show up?”

“If I don’t, he just goes back home.”

“Okay. You have a plan in mind?”

Malfoy nodded. “That book has a spell. You stand a distance away, but you seem to be in another place, like a projection. If they managed to follow him, they’ll open fire on me, but hit the projection. If I then take his hand—he extends it willingly, is the exact phrase the book uses—he gets teleported to where I really am. I can save him, and escape whoever’s waiting.”

“Sounds good. But that book is called, something like, Darkest Magics. Is that such a Dark spell? It doesn’t sound like it.”

Malfoy tilted his head in a shrug. “Well, a lot of them are darker than this. But, you know, they want to sell books, even 200 years ago. Haven’t you ever heard of a book that exaggerated a bit on the cover?”

* * * * *

Back inside the cave, Harry talked with the others about his next operation, a solo one. “I’m going to have a chat with Snape.”

This was greeted with general surprise. “Why?” asked Ron.

“Just to let him know, since he didn’t seem to get it the first time, that torture isn’t going to be tolerated.”

“Is he going to follow that order, just because it came from you?” asked Kingsley dubiously.

“He’d better,” said Harry. “I can keep picking off their DADA teachers if he doesn’t. I’d rather not, because it’ll just increase the pressure on the students, especially anyone seen as anti-what’s-his-name. He

cuts out the torture, I'll leave Hogwarts alone. But no one is going to suffer what Seamus did, that's for sure."

"What's the risk factor?" asked Kingsley.

"Almost zero," replied Harry. "I'm not using the Cloak, because I'm not abducting him, just talking to him. I don't even care if he grabs his wand, because I can defend myself. It might take only a few minutes, or if he's feeling talkative, it could be a half hour or more. Don't worry, Malfoy, I'll be on time for your appointment."

"Okay, Harry," said Kingsley, "but just to humor me, I'd like you to set up a two-way Portkey between this cave and the Room of Requirement. Which, come to think of it, wouldn't be a bad thing to have in general, especially once this cave is fully under the Fidelius Charm. Anyway, would you do that?"

"I'd be happy to humor you," joked Harry. A minute later, it was done.

"Harry," asked Ron, "are you 100% sure that this Snape is on our side?"

He saw from glancing around that others were equally unsure. "Obviously I can't say it's 100%, but I'd be really surprised if it wasn't the case. The important aspects of the situation from his point of view haven't changed. So, he should still be on our side."

"What are these 'important aspects'?" asked Malfoy.

"Sorry, but I'm not going to tell that to anyone in this dimension unless it's absolutely necessary. Not for operational reasons, but for privacy reasons. He told me, or showed me, as he died on the other side; it was extremely personal. It wouldn't be right to just spread that information over here."

Lupin spoke up. "I myself don't know the reason, but I do know that Professor Dumbledore trusted Snape. That's good enough for me."

"Okay, be back soon," said Harry. He touched his wand, and Disapparated.

Having already gotten the location of Snape's quarters from the Room of Requirement, he knew where it was without ever having been there. Arriving in the bedroom, the first thing he was aware of was a strong electrical-feeling charge, causing all of the muscles in his body to spasm; his wand flew out of his hand, which involuntarily opened. He fell to the ground, found himself leaning on the floor with one hand, and could move no further; it was as if he was paralyzed.

Having been lying in bed, Snape snapped awake, wand already in his hand; he reflexively Summoned Harry's wand away just as it hit the ground. A smug grin came to Snape's face as he sat up. "Potter," he sneered.

* * * * *

Next, Chapter 12, Slytherins and Power: Harry falls into a trap set by Snape, whose powerful hatred of Harry may jeopardize the cause they are both fighting for.

From Chapter 12: "In that case, your analysis is very elementary," Harry couldn't resist needling Snape, even though he knew it was in his best interest not to get Snape any more emotional than he already was. "What are you going to do, kill me?"

Snape spoke slowly and deliberately, with a cold fury. "I advise you not to tempt me."

Chapter 12

Slytherins and Power

Looking around, Harry's ability to see magic told him that there was a field of dark red magic spread all over the floor of Snape's quarters, from the ground to about a foot above the floor. Any part of Harry that was above that point could move, but it was only his head, shoulders, and part of one upper arm.

"Hello, Professor," said Harry calmly. He felt that he was in no real danger; as long as Snape was on their side, he wouldn't kill Harry. But he found that even if he contemplated being killed by Snape, it didn't bother him that much. "I came to have a chat with you."

Snape moved forward a little on the bed. "And how, pray tell, did you make your way so far into the room? You should have been stopped at the door."

He must not have heard the Apparition noise, thought Harry. Good. "I'll answer your questions, Professor, after you've removed this... whatever this is, and given me my wand back. We'll go out into the other room, sit down, and have a talk."

Snape's sneer became stronger. "It seems to me, Potter, that I am the one who will make the rules in this situation. You will tell me how you advanced so far into the room."

Harry shook his head. "Sorry. What I will tell you, and you may not believe this, but it's true... I have no hostile intentions. I just came to talk."

"Those without hostile intentions normally just turn up and request an audience."

Harry sighed. "Professor, please, let's not waste time. We both know that wouldn't have worked. Now, do you believe what I'm telling you?"

"Why should I?" Snape ostentatiously pointed his wand at Harry.

“Because you’re a Legilimens. You would know if I was lying.”

“Perhaps you have become a skilled Occlumens,” said Snape smoothly, as if it were the most logical possibility.

Harry rolled his eyes, and in so doing, got Luna’s view; she was in the Room, talking to Kingsley, Remus, Ron, Hermione, and Neville. “Not yet,” he muttered under his breath, letting Luna know they should attempt no rescue. To Snape, he said, “Yeah, because I was so good at Occlumency in fifth year. I don’t have to be a Legilimens to know that you don’t really think that. You know I’m telling the truth, you just don’t want to believe it, you want to pretend I’m lying.”

“Do not presume to tell me what I think!” shouted Snape, glaring at Harry.

Harry sighed in annoyance. “Look, Professor, we’re not going to get anywhere like this. I told you what the deal is. There’s absolutely no reason for you not to do as I’ve asked.”

“Quite the contrary; there is no reason for me to do as you’ve asked,” retorted Snape. “I have a wand, and freedom of movement. You have neither. Elementary tactical analysis suggests that I need not yield my advantage.”

“In that case, your analysis is very elementary,” Harry couldn’t resist needling Snape, even though he knew it was in his best interest not to get Snape any more emotional than he already was. “What are you going to do, kill me?”

Snape spoke slowly and deliberately, with a cold fury. “I advise you not to tempt me.”

“Well, it’s your choice,” admitted Harry, trying to sound unconcerned. “But you should keep this in mind. You know very well that there’s a prophecy, one that Professor Dumbledore showed me and believed, that said that I was the one who would be able to kill Voldem—”

The rest of the word died in Harry's mouth as Snape's Silencing spell took effect. Harry couldn't help but grin; he had said the word on purpose, taking a calculated risk that Snape would in fact Silence him.

"Idiot!" spat Snape. "Do you not know what happens when you say that word?"

"Yes, I know. I said it to find out where you stood. If you were really loyal to him, you'd have just let me say it, and his people would come and take me away. You know I'm the one who can beat him, so you don't want that to happen. So you stopped me. So since we're on the same side, why not treat me as someone who has the same goal as you do?"

Snape appeared very unhappy to have been tricked. "Perhaps I simply wish to keep my options open."

Harry's sense didn't detect a lie, which he realized was due in part to Snape's use of the word 'perhaps', not making it a firm statement. "Yeah, I don't think so. It seems to me that you have two choices: kill me, or give me my wand back and talk to me. So, what's it going to be?"

"I see a third option, which your very elementary tactical analysis apparently does not," said Snape menacingly. "I will Silence you, then use the Cruciatus Curse until you tell me how you entered the room. It should not take long."

Finally, Harry found himself truly thankful for one of his Auror Leader enhancements. "Actually, that's ironic, considering what I came here to talk to you about. But as to what you said, no, I'm still not talking."

"Crucio!"

Harry saw the purple bolt come at him. He experienced a strong blast of pain when it hit him, but as he concentrated, the pain quickly reduced in intensity, and after a few seconds became nothing more than a minor annoyance. He regarded Snape with slightly raised eyebrows, his expression asking the question, 'is that all you've got?'"

Snape's jaw dropped. "Impossible," he gasped.

"Well, clearly not," responded Harry.

"How did you do that?" demanded Snape.

"I'm not going to tell you that either." As if he had a sudden brainstorm, he added, "Oh, you know what you could do, you could threaten to torture me unless I tell you how I resisted the—oh, wait, that doesn't work..."

As he saw fury form yet again on Snape's face, he reflected that he really shouldn't try to provoke Snape. It was just so difficult not to...

Snape pointed the wand again, and this time, Harry felt a light brushing sensation on his left cheek. Unable to move his hand to check, he tilted his head so that it touched his robe. Looking at the sleeve, he saw the bloodstain. Again, he rolled his eyes. Seeing through Luna's eyes again, he murmured, 'no.' To Snape, he said, "Yes, you can cut me, for all the good that'll do you. I'm invulnerable to pain, not to physical damage. So, what do you plan to do?"

"I could start cutting off body parts," said Snape, with a superior expression.

Again, Harry couldn't resist. "I guess they didn't name you Severus for nothing. Body parts, tree branches, it's all the same to you."

The tree reference provoked a strong reaction, but Snape didn't ask a question about it. "Does this not concern you?"

"Look, I don't care if you kill me, so why should I care—"

"A lie!" said Snape triumphantly. "You do care!"

"A misstatement," Harry corrected him. "I was careless with words. I'm... not particularly bothered at the idea that you'll kill me. How about that? Any lie there?" Snape was silent. "Or did I suddenly become an expert Occlumens again?"

Snape pointed his wand at the floor; Harry saw some of the magical field which had ensnared him fade away, as Snape was creating a path to the door. He stood and left the room.

Harry took the opportunity to speak to the others through Luna. "I'm okay for now, don't leave the Room. But be ready. He's not exactly being reasonable."

After a few minutes, a frustrated Snape returned. "Our stock of Veritaserum seems to have disappeared."

Harry's tone was more flippant than he intended. "You know, it's interesting how you thought of torture before you thought of Veritaserum, even though Veritaserum works better."

Snape's eyes bored into Harry. "If you do not tell me how you entered this room, I will cut off your left hand at the wrist."

Harry's sense told him that Snape was serious. Time to roll out the heavy artillery, he thought. "Lily Evans would be so proud," he said, as the blood drained from Snape's stunned face. "So pleased that you plan to cut her son into pieces. If she's watching, I'm sure she'll forgive you. You had a good reason."

Snape tried to put up a brave front, but had already given himself away. "What does your mother have to do with this?"

"You're not a very good actor. You loved her. You asked Vold—what's-his-name not to kill her, but he did, and you turned against him because he killed the woman you loved."

Snape paused, anger and disbelief on his face. "Dumbledore said he would never tell anyone, but he told you." Harry realized that Snape felt as though he'd been betrayed.

"He didn't. I also know that before coming to Hogwarts, you broke a tree branch, and it hit Lily's sister Petunia. Lily was angry with you. After a few years at Hogwarts, it made you very happy that she said that James Potter was 'an arrogant toerag.' These are things Dumbledore didn't know, aren't they?"

Snape was shocked into dropping all pretense that what Harry said wasn't true. "How..."

"Sorry. Not telling. Unless I get my wand back, etc. etc."

"You will tell me!" shouted Snape.

Harry was beginning to fear that this would end badly. He bowed his head so Snape couldn't see his lips move, and looked up to talk to Luna. "Get in position," he said, very quietly. He knew they would move from the Room of Requirement to the outside of Snape's quarters, ready to come in at his signal. The magical field would prevent their coming in, but not pointing their wands through the door.

"Professor, please, let's calm down, okay? Is there any reason we can't talk about this like two reasonable people? Or is your anger at me so much, or should I say, your anger at my father—because I know that's what you see when you look at me—so much that you can't control it? Because I'm not my father, you know. And I'm not my mother. I'm just me. Can you just accept that?"

Snape's face was as hard as stone. "I will not discuss anything until you have answered the questions I have asked."

Harry tried the simple approach. "Why?"

Snape stared back. "Answer my questions."

Using advice from the Auror Leader portraits, Harry tried to analyze the situation, and something came to him. "Power! That's what this is about for you! You'll talk to me, but only as long as you have the wand and I don't, you can move and I can't. You've got me in a situation that you would've dearly loved to get my father in, and you're so deep in that you can't see the difference. Letting me up off the floor would be like letting James Potter, your tormentor, off the floor, and you won't do that. Professor, listen to me. I am not James Potter. I have never done anything to hurt you. I am trying to accomplish the same thing you are. Please, let's talk about it."

Again, the stare. "Answer my questions."

Harry sighed. "Okay, I'm going to have one more try. Because I entered your quarters as I did, and you had some right to be unhappy, I am going to give you one piece of information. It may answer your questions, it may not. But it's all you're getting until I get my wand. Do a Reveal Magic spell on my forehead."

Snape didn't react to the odd request, but he did react, again with shock, when he saw the result. "Impossible."

God, this is tedious, thought Harry. "And yet..."

Snape seemed to be thinking. "This may explain how you entered, and how you resisted the Curse. But it cannot explain your knowledge of my memories. You must tell me how you know this." Snape pointed the wand again.

"I already told you, I'm not carrying on this conversation with you at wandpoint!"

"We will sit here until you tell me."

Screw this, thought Harry. "No, we won't. Here's the deal. If I don't have my wand in my hand one minute after I finish speaking... one minute after that, you won't have yours. Two minutes after that, you'll be out of Hogwarts, never to return. You'll never hold a wand in your hand again. I'm not joking, and I'm not lying. Now, it's up to you."

"You are not in a position to—"

"What is wrong with you??" Harry exploded. "Are you so traumatized by what my father did that you have no sense of reality? Get it through your head, I'm not him! When they were at Hogwarts, he and Sirius were immature, arrogant, cruel, bullying asses! A lot of people are like that when they're that age! It happens! Most people get over it, but apparently not you! Are you going to let this hatred you had as a schoolboy dominate your whole life? What kind of life is that?"

Snape continued to stare straight ahead, showing no reaction. Harry waited for a few seconds.

Harry lowered his head and directed his eyes upward. "Okay. Time's up."

Two seconds later, the magical field on the ground disappeared, and his wand was being tossed to him. "Belay," he whispered quickly, looking upward. Drained, he leaned against the wall from his position on the ground. "Was that really that hard?"

Snape's expression hadn't changed much, except now he seemed to be staring past Harry instead of at him. "How do you know those memories?"

Harry had to fight hard not to say the words, 'to hell with this, I'm not going to deal with you,' He strongly felt it, but he knew that it would be better in the long run if he could manage to deal with Snape. Clearly, Snape wasn't going to make it easy. "I'm from another dimension, very similar to this one. In my dimension, it was the same as this one until the point where Draco Malfoy had to make the decision whether to kill Dumbledore. In my dimension, he was indecisive until you got there, and you then killed Dumbledore, as he asked you to do. Several months later, the Dark Lord killed you because you'd outlived your usefulness to him. I found you as you were dying, and you gave me some memories that helped me understand what had happened in your life, including the fact that Dumbledore believed that I just had to go off and die after finding the Horcruxes."

Snape appeared to be trying to digest all this. After a minute, he said, "That is a... very unlikely story."

Harry grunted. "Tell me about it. Not anything I wanted, believe me."

"What brought you to this dimension? What of the Harry Potter that is native to this dimension?"

"An accident brought me here, and I switch with my counterpart in a way that's outside of my control. The time I spend here increases every time I switch.

“Look... my main objective is to stop this switching, to get back to where I’m supposed to be, but I don’t know how to do that. While I’m here, my objective is to figure out how to get the Horcrux out of my other self, and eventually get rid of the Dark Lord. Malfoy had an idea, from an old book—“

“Ah, the break-in at Malfoy Manor.”

“Yes. It didn’t work.” Harry briefly described what had happened. “We’re trying to figure out another way.” He went on to explain how it had happened in his dimension. “We don’t assume it’d happen the same way here, so that’s kind of a last resort.”

“Why did you come here? What did you wish to talk to me about?”

Snape was still on the bed and Harry was still on the floor, but he didn’t particularly care, as long as he had his wand.

“Well, I hoped we could work together, or at least, somewhat cooperatively. I had wanted to talk to you at some point. But the timing was caused by all the torture that’s been going on at Hogwarts, especially what happened to Seamus today. It was lucky for him that you happened along when you did.”

“It was not luck,” said Snape derisively, as if Harry should have known it. “Some Dark wizards can detect significant Dark magic being done nearby, and I sensed that the Curse was being done in a sustained way. I entered the room for the purpose of ending that session.”

Impressed, Harry nodded. “I’m sure Seamus will appreciate that when I tell him.”

“You will do no such thing,” instructed Snape sharply. “Nothing I say here is to be repeated to anyone, for any reason. Do you agree to this stipulation?”

“Provided I get the same courtesy from you, yes,” Harry countered. “Do we have an understanding?”

Snape paused, considering it. Harry found he couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes yet again. "I'm sorry, Professor, I know this is difficult for you. But I'm sure you can understand that as Auror Leader, I'm just not going to deal with anyone on less than equal terms. So, are we agreed?"

Snape paused again. "Agreed," he finally said.

Harry detected reluctance, but no lie. "Good. So I'll say, I'm sure Seamus would appreciate it if he knew, which he won't. Now, one of the important things I wanted to say in this visit is that the torture at Hogwarts has got to stop."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Oh, it does, does it?"

"Yes, it does."

Snape's sneer was back. "And how do you suggest that this be accomplished?"

"You're the headmaster. You just decree that it's not allowed."

Snape gave Harry a 'how can you be so stupid' look. "Oh, yes, I am sure that the Dark Lord will not find such a thing suspicious in the least."

"Is it really so important to him that there's torture here?"

"There is a reason, Potter, that we call him the Dark Lord, as opposed to, say, the Bright Lord," said Snape derisively. "Torture is a weapon of power. The Dark Lord wields power, and expects those who wield it on his behalf to use it as a weapon to increase their power, and by extension, his own. It was his decision to put Carrow here, then Yaxley, and they acted as they believed he would wish. Yaxley may very well have been acting under specific orders. All I can do, which I have done, is decline to do it myself, and to find various excuses to curb such... excesses as we saw today. There is nothing more I can do."

Harry shrugged. "Then you're going to have a lot of DADA teachers this year."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Where is Yaxley?"

"In a safe place. He said he was planning on doing the same thing to a lot of—"

"You idiot! Do you really think this is going to accomplish anything? Do you think that it will occur to the Dark Lord to send in more... kindly instructors? Or will he see this as a challenge to his authority, and take ever-sterner measures to consolidate his hold over Hogwarts? Not to mention, he will put increasing pressure on me to discover the reason these instructors are disappearing. If I fail, I will be replaced, my standing with the Dark Lord will fall, and my value in the fight against him will be dramatically reduced. Tell me, Potter, is this a desirable outcome?"

Harry closed his eyes in frustration, as what Snape was saying made sense. "No. But I'm just not going to sit around while my friends are being tortured."

Snape loudly scoffed. "You just castigated me for allowing my emotions to cloud my judgment! You are no better, simply in a different way. One must face reality, Potter, as you told me just a short time ago. He has Hogwarts; that is a fact. Any student who wishes to avoid the possibility of being tortured would be well advised to simply leave, as Longbottom and apparently now Finnegan have done. Failing that, I suggest you attempt to find a more... creative solution to this problem."

Harry slowly nodded, Snape's comment about students leaving Hogwarts having planted the germ of an idea in his mind. "I'll think about it."

"You should also return Yaxley to his quarters, give him a Memory—"

"No way. Not after what he did to Seamus. Not going to happen."

Snape seemed to have expected that answer, but continued to argue. "If Yaxley is not returned, it will become apparent that the Carrows' action was not as it was made to appear. Stricter security measures are a likely result, and I will be held to account."

Harry thought about it. "If you can hold off the news getting out—cancel his classes, put out the word that he's sick or something—I can do something that'll make it look like the Carrows, and that would take the pressure off of you. You can tell him those quarters may be jinxed, and you'll put the next teacher in different quarters."

"You are thinking of some public action under the Imperius Curse?"

"I was actually thinking of Polyjuice Potion, but something like that, yes."

"It could work, if it was sufficiently clever," allowed Snape. "I find that I do not have overwhelming confidence in your ability to do such a thing."

"Don't worry, I'll get advice."

"Besides Malfoy, who else is with you?"

"Sorry. Not talking about who's with me."

Snape shrugged lightly. "It would be helpful to know."

"I know. But I'm trying to be very careful about what I let out. I don't want anyone to know that I'm Auror Leader, for example."

Snape was puzzled. "Why not? You could recruit many Aurors, you would have more public support. Granted, the Dark Lord's forces would more energetically work against you, but it seems a price well worth paying."

"I may yet consider it, just not right now." Slowly, he got to his feet. "Well, I'll be off now, unless you think there's anything more we need to discuss."

“There is one thing. I would like you to relay to Mr. Malfoy some aspects of our conversation—anything dealing with operational matters, or strategy against the Dark Lord—but not other aspects. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded. “Perfectly.”

“I am sure that you do.”

Nodding his goodbye, Harry walked out of the room, through the main living space of Snape’s quarters, and out the door. He assumed that Snape might watch or follow him surreptitiously, so he didn’t want to either Disapparate or walk to the Room. Instead, he decided to walk directly to the castle gate. As he neared the entrance to the castle, down a hall to his right as he passed he saw Filch approaching, fifteen meters away. “Stop! Whoever you are!”

Harry knew the distance was enough that Filch probably couldn’t recognize him, and he didn’t want it known that he’d been there. Wand already in his hand, he sent a low-power Stunner at Filch, who went down instantly. Just not his week, thought Harry as he exited the castle.

* * * * *

“You can’t tell us anything?” complained Ron, back at the cave.

Harry shook his head. “Sorry. That was his condition.”

“It certainly seemed as though there was a lot of... spirited negotiation,” observed Kingsley dryly.

“You could say that,” agreed Harry. “But I will say that it was useful, and that I think we understand each other better. It wasn’t easy, though.”

“He’s hated you for so long, it was probably difficult for him to see you as anything like an equal,” commented Hermione. “Almost any word he ever said to you was some kind of insult.”

Harry decided to have some fun. "Well, yes, but that used to be true with Malfoy here, too. And look at us now! Best mates."

Ron and Hermione chuckled. "Get stuffed, Potter," retorted an annoyed Malfoy.

Harry grinned. "See what I mean? Just like old pals. Actually, Malfoy, would you come outside with me? There's something I need to talk to you about."

They stopped walking after Harry was sure they were far enough away not to be overheard. Harry told Malfoy about the meeting with Snape.

"Why me, and not anyone else?" wondered Malfoy after Harry finished.

"I don't know, he didn't say. If I had to guess, I'd imagine that he wants to keep in contact with you. He's hated me for so long that it's hard for him to deal with me in any adult, as-equals way. He wants to be in contact, but with you rather than me."

"Makes sense," agreed Malfoy. "So, ready for later?"

"Yeah, no problem. Hey, do you think there's any reason I shouldn't Apparate into my vault?"

Malfoy shook his head. "The security magic isn't in the vaults themselves, they're in the halls, passageways, and the vault doors. They just assume nobody can Apparate in. I think there'd be almost zero risk."

"Yeah, but that's what I thought about Apparating into Snape's quarters. He could've killed me if he'd wanted to."

"You can't start doubting yourself just because one thing didn't go as planned. There's some risk in anything you do. Start down that path, and you're no good to anyone."

"Yeah. I suppose you're right."

"I usually am."

Harry grinned. "I'll keep that in mind. Let's go tell Ron and Hermione the plan."

* * * * *

At two minutes to three, Harry and Malfoy stood still along the side of a building about twenty meters away from the spot at which Malfoy planned to meet his godfather. "Is he going to be on time?" asked Harry.

"He will," said Malfoy confidently. "He's very punctual, and he's impatient with those who aren't. I'm going to start reciting the incantation; you have to do it for about 20 seconds before the spell works, so don't interrupt me." Malfoy started reciting words in a low voice. A half a minute later, an old man Apparated near the three large trees. Malfoy pointed his wand, and he suddenly appeared next to the man, even though he was still standing next to Harry. It was somewhat disconcerting.

"Mr. Blackstone," said Malfoy warmly, extending his hand. "It's good to see you."

"You too, my boy," said the man, reaching out to shake Malfoy's. "I've missed you."

Harry saw Malfoy's face take on a rare contrite expression. "Sir, I wanted to apologize. I should have listened—"

"Draco, Draco," Blackstone waved Malfoy off. "You need not apologize. The pull of family is powerful, as it should be, and you are young. Speaking of which... I was sorry to hear of your parents' fate."

"It's my fault—"

"It is not your fault, Draco," snapped the old man, his voice suddenly steely rather than tender, as it had been. "Murder is a hard thing, and it should be. When you make the decision to take a life, you begin

playing by a different set of rules. Your father understood this, but he believed he would always end up on top. When he joined the Dark Lord, he no longer commanded his own destiny. He, not you, is responsible for his fate. I am just glad that you escaped. Did you assist Dumbledore?”

“Yes, sir. He told me how the Dark Lord survived. Seven Horcruxes. One deposited, by accident, into the baby Harry Potter.”

“Merlin,” exhaled the man. “The Dark Lord must no longer be in his right mind. What did Dumbledore ask of you?”

“That I help remove the Horcrux from Potter, allowing him to fulfill the prophecy. I tried, but failed. A small but important oversight. Dumbledore is now dead, and I don’t know how the Horcrux can be removed. We are investigating other means.”

“Something will come up. There is always a way.”

“I’m sure you’re right, sir. Of course, I would welcome your help.”

“I will do what I can. What kind of man is Potter?”

“Quiet. Serious. Not worldly. The epitome of a Gryffindor, may be the best way to say it. Some Hufflepuff qualities. Loyalty, fairness.”

The old man grunted. “I never had much use for Hufflepuffs, except as shopkeepers. They treat the regular customers well. But the combination you describe has the potential to be a great Auror—“

With multiple popping sounds, six people Apparated in within a second, a few very near the old man. “Ron, Hermione!” Harry said to Luna urgently.

Malfoy reached for Blackstone’s hand, but the man went down under a Stunning spell, and Malfoy came up empty. Malfoy dove to the ground, just missing a few Stunners.

Ron and Hermione Apparated in near Harry, and without a word, all pointed their wands at the group of enemies; the spell, a wide-field

Stunner, had already been decided. At twenty yards, the spell normally wouldn't have much impact, but it reached its target; all six men went down. Harry dashed forward, Ron and Hermione behind him. The image of Malfoy that had been near Harry had disappeared; Malfoy was fully at the other location, trying to help Blackstone. He tried to Disapparate, but one of the attackers had put down an anti-Disapparation field. "Potter! Get him out of here!" shouted Malfoy.

A few seconds later, Harry reached Malfoy and his godfather, and bent down. As he did so, Ron and Hermione were firing individual Stunners, as some of the attackers, while knocked down by the wide-field spell, weren't unconscious.

One attacker on the ground pointed his wand at Harry and Malfoy as Malfoy tried to hand Blackstone over to Harry. Before Harry could Disapparate, a gold piece of magical energy that looked like a whip wrapped around all of them, and the man fell victim to Ron's Stunner as the world started spinning.

The next thing Harry knew, they were in the familiar basement of Malfoy Manor where Luna had been held. The attacker whose spell had taken them there—pretty interesting spell, thought Harry, have to learn it sometime—was unconscious, as was Blackstone.

"Get him out of here," Malfoy said urgently.

Harry knew that Malfoy couldn't leave, and Harry could Apparate into and out of a room in which Apparition wasn't normally possible only so many times in a short period. If someone came down the stairs quickly, Malfoy would be captured. "Will you be okay?"

"The sooner you leave—"

Harry knew the rest of the sentence, and immediately Disapparated along with Blackstone. In the cave, Harry handed the old man to Luna. "Kingsley and Professor Lupin went to help Ron and Hermione," she reported.

"Good. I'm going back to get Malfoy."

He Disapparated again, and was back in the Malfoy Manor basement. This Disapparation took more effort than usual, and Harry knew he wouldn't be able to get them out for another minute, maybe less.

“Potter!”

A ball of white energy had entered the basement, traveling through the air and heading for Harry and Malfoy. Harry had never seen it before, but somehow knew what it was: a ball of energy that sought out a target and exploded, probably with stunning effect. He could have tried to destroy it or change its direction—he had no idea what would work—but impulsively chose to put up a magical shield large enough to cover himself and Malfoy.

Hitting the shield, the ball exploded, knocking the two back against the wall of the basement, where they slid to the ground. Harry hoped no one would come down for a second, because with the effort of the shield, he was sure that he was still a minute away from being able to Apparate them away. He could chance it, of course, but a Splinch would be disastrous under current circumstances.

“I'll try to get us out in one minute,” Harry said quickly. “Sooner if I have to, but I'd rather wait.”

Malfoy started to get up. “I'm all for that—”

“Get back down, play dead,” said Harry, having heard footsteps above, suggesting that someone might be about to come down. Malfoy did as Harry asked; Harry made sure to arrange himself on the ground so that his head was down and not easily visible, but an eye could be kept on the stairs leading to the basement. His wand was seemingly accidentally pointed in the direction of anyone who might approach from the stairs.

Twenty seconds later, two sets of footsteps started down the stairs. Harry quickly decided not to try to Disapparate yet, so they would have to deal with these two.

“What do you think the Dark Lord'll do to Malfoy?” asked one conversationally.

“Whatever it is, I’m not sure I’d have the stomach to watch,” said the other. “Oh, look! He got some friends! The Dark Lord’ll be happy—”

The man not talking was taking out his wand, preparing to use it against Malfoy. Without moving, Harry shot off a low-power Stunner, trying to keep the spell invisible. The man went down; his partner wasted a second looking around before realizing it had to be the man on the ground near Malfoy. Before he could do anything, he had been Stunned as well, his Protection charm not enough to stop Harry’s highest-power Stunner.

“Okay, we can get up,” said Harry, sitting up. “Ready to go?”

“Too bad we can’t take them with us,” mused Malfoy.

“I suspect Hermione and Dean will have their hands full with the ones we got near the trees,” pointed out Harry. “Let’s go there, see if they need any help mopping up.”

Apparating to their former hiding place in Hogsmeade, they found that nobody was there, so they went to the cave. Hermione and Ron were sitting on the ground, Hermione checking Blackstone with her wand.

“I’m pretty sure he’s okay,” she said to Harry and Malfoy. “Just Stunned. I’m not sure whether or not to Enervate him.”

“He would want us to,” said Malfoy firmly as he did so. Getting his first close-up look at the man, Harry was mildly startled to find that Blackstone was not just blind, but was using glass eyes that were pure white, with no attempt to simulate a corona or pupil. He found it disconcerting, and wondered whether that was the idea.

The man started moving, slowly. “Mr. Blackstone, are you all right?” asked Malfoy, with more care and concern than he’d have imagined Malfoy would treat anyone.

“I... I will be. Where am I?”

"They Stunned you, sir. We were able to get you away; this is a man-made cave, a kind of hideout. I Enervated you, so you may be groggy for a bit."

The man waved Malfoy off. "I'll be fine. I sense that there are a few people around me, Draco. Would you be so good as to introduce me?"

"Yes, sir. To your left is Ron Weasley, and to your right, Hermione Granger. They helped rescue us after we were attacked."

"My appreciation to the both of you, then," said Blackstone, who then looked straight at Harry. "That being the case, I imagine that I am addressing Harry Potter."

Harry decided to follow Malfoy's lead and treat the man with respect. "Yes, sir, that's right. How did you know?"

"I know enough about events in England, and Hogwarts, to know that where there are Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, Harry Potter cannot be far behind. Besides, you are... conspicuous."

"In what way, sir?"

"In a way that only I would be able to tell. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Leader Potter."

Stunned, Harry looked at Malfoy, the accusation in his eyes. Malfoy was utterly baffled. "I didn't tell him, Potter! I had no chance!"

Harry turned back to Blackstone. "Sir, right now that is a very closely held secret. I would very much like to know how you knew that."

"The answer to that, Leader Potter, is also a 'very closely held secret,' and has been for over forty years. But I am getting old, old enough that I need not keep secrets for the sake of keeping them. It is a reflex, I suppose."

Blackstone sat up straighter, then continued, with a gesture indicating his eyes. "Soon after this happened, young Draco's paternal

grandfather, a close friend of mine, arranged for me to see a Brazilian wizard, a specialist in the senses. He told me that he could give me back my sight, after a fashion. These eyes would help me see colors, shapes, and vague outlines of various items. I would not be able to read, or discern expressions, but I would be able to walk without a cane, not at the mercy of those who care for me.

“I engaged him in conversation. He told me that he was capable of providing sensory information of very different kinds. He had a knack, the only one in the world as far as he knew. To a blinded Chilean Healer, he gave the sense of being able to look at a body and immediately see what the problem was. Another of his patients chose, rather than partial sight, the ability to see emotions as if they were flowing strokes on a constantly changing painting.”

He ‘looked’ at Draco. “What would any self-respecting Slytherin do? Intrigued by the possibilities, I chose to be able to see power. I can look at a person and see both how much power he has, and how much he believes he has. By ‘power’ of course I do not mean magical power, but rather power in the sense that Slytherins desire it. Influence. The ability to persuade, bend others to one’s will, or guide others to do one’s will with such a gentle touch that the other does not know he is being guided. The hues of power appear to me in such a way.

“For example... the young man to my left is of a family that cares not for power, and therefore has little. But he himself has some, of an unusual shade; it is the knowledge that his accomplishments have brought him the respect of many, and he will be listened to for this reason. Oddly, I am not aware of the events that bring this knowledge—they must be secret to me—but they cannot be denied, to me they are as plain as day. The reflected power of being a close friend of the Auror Leader is present, but secondary.

“Now, the young lady I would know was Muggle-born even had I not already been aware; there is a stripe of newness to the magical world. She is also not interested in power, but respect, and has more of that than she is aware. She is in the process of realizing this, and will soon rid herself of the need to prove herself. Like the young man,

there is also power in the knowledge, known by many, that she has the respect and confidence of the Auror Leader.”

Amazed, Hermione shook her head. “Remarkable.”

“The man who provided me with this was remarkable indeed,” said Blackstone. “Now, the Auror Leader... this confuses me, actually. Draco, perhaps you would explain this to me, because I sense that you know. The evidence of my senses contradicts what I know to be true; it is as if I saw a boy whose countenance revealed less than ten years, yet who possessed the knowledge and wisdom of an old man. Weasley and Granger have the self-possession of those who have done great deeds that have brought them wide acclaim, yet I am unaware of those deeds, and would certainly know if they had occurred.”

Malfoy explained the situation regarding the dimensional shifts; Blackstone listened quietly. “Fascinating. It seems that no matter how long I live, there will always be some magic of which I was not aware.

“This explains the Leader, who I have no doubt has defeated the Dark Lord where he comes from. Power emanates from him, a power unsought but well-earned, that he is only beginning to learn how to use. This power is a hue I have never before seen; it springs from a moral authority so powerful that good men would not say no to any request from him; they would be shamed to do so, knowing what he has done. The only man I have ever seen whose power was in any way similar was Dumbledore, whose defeat of Grindelwald gave him moral authority, though less than that of the Leader. But Dumbledore did not trust himself with power, and shut himself away at Hogwarts. The Leader, though at first reluctant, trusts himself to do what he considers to be the right thing. His power will grow slowly through time, as will his comfort in using it.”

Harry exchanged impressed glances with Ron, Hermione, and Malfoy. “That Brazilian wizard did quite a job.”

Blackstone nodded. “He did indeed, he did indeed. I have occasionally regretted my loss of sight, but what I acquired in return seems to me a more than fair exchange. And I seem not totally blind,

since I can know where people are, based on the sensory information I get from them. I can recognize individual people as well, based on the uniqueness of the information. And—I have occasionally performed this as a party trick—I can tell with 98% accuracy which Hogwarts house a person belonged to. I never make a mistake with Slytherin or Hufflepuff; I do occasionally confuse Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, as their power signatures are similar.

“But what I find most fascinating about the Leader—he is, of course, the first Leader I have ever met, as the last one died eighty years ago—is that not only do I see a strong and truly unique brand of power, but I also perceive, at the spot corresponding to the forehead, the Auror Leader symbol itself! Quite remarkable indeed; I would not have thought it possible.”

“Wow,” marveled Malfoy. “My father never even knew this?”

“No, he did not. Perhaps I should have told you, Draco. It is my vanity; one wishes to keep one’s secrets.”

“I can really understand that, sir,” said Malfoy; Harry could tell from his tone that he was thinking of his mistake that had had such a disastrous effect on Harry’s counterpart. “We have a tough job, and I’m really hoping that you’ll be able to help us.”

“Of course, my boy. It was my intention to be of service when I contacted you; I knew you must be in dire straits. And I apologize for having brought along the company I did; I thought I was sufficiently careful as to avoid that.”

“It’s no problem, sir,” Harry assured him. “We were prepared for the possibility, of course. Now we just have to figure out what to do with them.”

Hermione looked at Harry. “Which reminds me, I need to go help Dean with that, and it may take the rest of the night. Ron, could you come and help us out?”

“Sure,” agreed Ron; they excused themselves and left the cave.

Harry and Malfoy spent more time filling Blackstone in on the current situation, and Harry asked him about an idea he was working on. Blackstone and Malfoy helped him refine it, and after an hour, he was happy with it.

Malfoy helped Blackstone get ready to sleep as Harry walked over to the other side of the cave. Xenophilius was sound asleep in his sleeping bag; Luna was reading a book. Harry sat beside her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"You've had a busy night," she observed.

"But productive. How's your father?"

She shrugged. "He's all right, but he's discouraged. He wants to feel useful."

"Well, then he should feel better soon, because he's going to be useful, sometime in the next week." He told her the broad outlines of the plan.

She smiled. "I like that idea. As for him, I'm sure he'll be happy to do it, but he won't be happy that it won't be the Quibbler. He'll think it makes perfect sense for it to be that."

"The plan wouldn't work if it was."

"Oh, I know, of course. Don't worry, it'll be fine. I'll tell him during the next switch, it's better if it's me." They sat in silence for a few minutes. "You know, I was watching a lot when you were talking to Snape. I'd heard a lot about how terrible he was to you in your classes, but seeing his face when he was talking to you... I was kind of scared, to be honest. I've never seen anybody with so much hate."

He nodded. "I know."

"But then, at the point where he gave you back your wand, his face really changed. It was like all the emotion went out of it, and he was talking like it was business. What changed?"

Harry decided it wouldn't be breaking his word to Snape if he told Luna this small detail. "I threatened him, and I meant it. If Kingsley and the others had had to rescue me, he'd have gone into the Muggle world with the Carrows. Since he's a Legilimens, he knew I was serious, and that I could back up my threat. Snape is a Slytherin, he understands power. By showing him that I was Auror Leader, and by threatening him, he knew I was his equal, and that whether he liked it or not, he had to treat me as such. It was difficult for him, because he was so used to hating me. But fortunately, his self-preservation instinct kicked in."

"Would you really have done that? I mean, he is on our side, we pretty much know that."

"Yes, I would've done it; he would have seen if it was an empty threat. I had to mean it. And yes, he's on our side. But if his hatred of me was so strong that he'd torture me, lop off body parts, or keep me captive until I talked on his terms, then it doesn't do me much good to know that he's an ally. I couldn't know that he wouldn't decide he hated me more than what's-his-name. I don't like it, but with the prophecy, I'm basically the focus of the anti-what's-his-name forces, and anyone who does to me what he did has to be considered adversarial. I didn't want to do it—it was a last resort—but I think he wouldn't have respected me if I hadn't. Like I said, that's the language he understands."

Luna sighed. "It must be difficult."

"It is, but... sometimes I feel like, this is my life, this is what happens to me. People have been after me, strange things happen around me, ever since I was one year old. I don't know if I can say I'm used to it, but it's something like that. So, it may be difficult, but so is my life. It's just the status quo."

She put her hand on his knee and squeezed it. "I was surprised, and a little angry, when he cut your face like that."

Harry nodded. "After I withstood the Curse, he was just checking to make sure I could be hurt, that a Severing spell would work."

“But he didn’t actually cut off any body parts.”

Harry smiled. “No, he didn’t.”

“Good,” she said with a straight face. “There are some things I’m looking forward to.”

He laughed and looked over at her; now, she gave him a small smile. He smiled again, and held her more tightly, his arm still around her shoulder. He would soon have to get back to thinking about what had to be done, but he was glad that he could have a moment like this once in a while. It made it a lot easier to deal with everything else.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 13, The False Prophet: Angered by a perceived lack of respect, Xenophilius withdraws his assistance to an operation Harry hopes will bring an end to torture at Hogwarts.

From Chapter 13: Zabini gave Harry a crooked smile. “How’s it going, Potter?”

Harry did a double-take. “Sorry, who?”

Chuckling, Zabini shook his head. “Nice try, but you’re not a good actor. I’m not saying how, but Polyjuice Potion doesn’t fool me. Now, do you want to talk, or not?”

This is annoying, thought Harry. It could also be dangerous.

Chapter 13

The False Prophet

Harry fell asleep at about 6:00 a.m., after Hermione and Dean had finished dealing with the captured Death Eaters and their assistants. Yaxley, however, would be kept for a while longer. The last thing Harry did before sleeping was to leave a message in the Pensieve for the other Ron and Hermione.

He awoke in his quarters on the island and decided to go out to the beach for a swim and to get clean before talking to anyone. When he finally reached the table, he greeted everyone; only Ron, Hermione and Dean weren't at the table, as they were still sleeping. Luna was the only one who'd been in the cave who was already at the table. He gave them an update on what had happened, and asked for theirs. He found that Lee and Angelina had spent half of the night talking to Katie, who lived in her own place; she had offered to put up one or two people at a time if it would help. Angelina suggested that this offer be taken up only if there was dire need, as being caught assisting those opposing Voldemort could have serious consequences. Harry appreciated Katie's offer, but agreed with Angelina.

Katie had also offered to help procure supplies, if she was given the money with which to do it. She had specifically mentioned miniaturized food, but again Harry wasn't inclined to take her up on it, as sales of such things might be being monitored. He knew something had to be done, though, as food supplies for those on the run were running low. Harry knew Malfoy might have more money, but wasn't inclined to ask him for any. Malfoy might be helping them wholeheartedly, but he likely wouldn't be above leveraging the money for more control over various aspects of their lives.

Harry explained that at the next switch, he would Apparate into his Gringotts vault and take as much as he thought could be carried. To his surprise, Corner raised an objection. "Harry, wouldn't that really be the money belonging to the other Harry? Shouldn't he be consulted about whether and how it's used? After all, it is his money."

Harry couldn't help but roll his eyes. "You really do like to be argumentative, don't you?"

A few people chuckled as Corner met Harry's gaze. "Yes, I've heard that. And?"

"Do you really think I'd do it if I thought he'd have a serious problem with it?"

Corner shrugged. "I don't know."

"Isn't it awful how he's always kissing up to you, Harry?" joked Lee.

"Bootlicker," added George.

"Um, George... could you really not find another phrase?" asked Terry.

Loud laughter ensued. "Damn!" exclaimed George. "That's the first accidental joke I've made in a long time! I do like them to be intentional."

"Really?" asked a surprised Terry. "I must have heard every boot-related joke that's ever been thought of. Fortunately, by second year, all the Ravenclaws got tired of them."

"Well, anyway," said Harry, "I would ask him if I could, just for form's sake, but he's out of commission, so I have to make decisions for both of us. I never really cared that much about the money anyway. So, Michael, you shouldn't worry about it."

"Is that an order?" inquired Corner, with a hint of a smile.

"Sure, why not," responded Harry lightly. "So, the next morning at Hogwarts, did anybody notice that Yaxley wasn't there?"

Padma answered. "I saw a few people noticing that he wasn't at the teachers' table for breakfast. Do you want us to spread the word next time?"

"No. It may be a few days before they send in another, and it has occurred to me that they may not get any better. But I had an interesting idea last night. And to do it right, I'm going to need people in each dormitory. So, Justin and Ernie, you can help in Hufflepuff; Terry, Michael, Padma, and I'm sure Anthony will help in Ravenclaw, and of course Parvati, Seamus, and others in Gryffindor." He went on to explain the plan.

"Wow, that could get chaotic," said Seamus.

"That's part of the idea," agreed Harry. "So, the next switch is tomorrow afternoon. We may not be able to arrange this for a few switches, but I'd like those who are so inclined to start doing some writing. And sorry, George, but it can't be humorous."

George appeared disappointed. "And here I had already come up with one: 'Researchers Find Correlation Between Dark Wizards and Small Willies.'"

Laughing, Harry shook his head. "Sorry."

"How can we write when we can't bring it over?" asked Padma.

"Okay, good point," conceded Harry. "But I think if you write it, you'll remember most of it, and can write it over there again. And of course, this is top secret at Hogwarts."

The conversation splintered off into three or four smaller ones as people started exchanging ideas. Shouldn't be hard to fill up four pages, thought Harry.

* * * * *

Harry decided to avoid any major operations during the next switch, as he wanted to spend the time preparing for the one that would take a lot of time and energy. He did finally Apparate into his vault, and as Malfoy had predicted, had no problems whatsoever. They still lacked Muggle money, of course, but gold could be melted down and converted if necessary. Justin said that Colin had offered to help with that, with the assistance of his father.

In that and the following switch, many logistical tasks were handled. Kingsley and Remus did stationary magic spells to greatly increase the apparent space of the cave, creating eight separated sleeping areas, a meeting room, and one 'common room.' One sleeping area, for Luna and her father, was larger because it also contained the printing press, for which Xenophilius already had most necessary supplies, though a few had to be purchased. Malfoy met with Kitterman, who to Malfoy's astonishment asked for seven Galleons per miniaturized meal even though the retail price was one Galleon. Harry and Malfoy agreed that they would get by with Muggle food, though Malfoy often criticized it when actually called upon to eat it. Hermione discovered that there already existed a kind of food that was tasteless and didn't require heating; it was used to feed those in Azkaban. Kingsley knew how to acquire some, and they put Yaxley in the Chamber with a week's supply of food, water, and a container with a Vanishing field at the bottom to serve as a toilet, which according to Kingsley was also standard for prisoners, including at Azkaban.

It bothered his conscience a bit, but Harry decided not to lift the Memory Charm he'd put on Slughorn, even though he'd said he would. By now, Snape would have already asked Slughorn, and determined that Slughorn hadn't assisted voluntarily, but given Snape's irrational attitude towards Harry, it was more likely than not that an inopportune question from Snape could get Slughorn in trouble. Unfortunately, Slughorn would have started keeping the Veritaserum and Polyjuice Potion in a different place at Snape's behest, perhaps even in Snape's office or quarters. Harry and the others would have to get by with what they had.

Five days after Harry had gotten the idea when talking to Snape, he met in the cave with six of the Auror trainees as well as Malfoy, Kingsley, Hestia, Blackstone, Lupin, Tonks, and Xenophilius.

"Okay," began Harry. "We have all the articles, and Mr. Lovegood tells us that it's more than enough to fill it up, so some of it may have to be cut. It'll be four pages, same paper size and lettering type as the Prophet, since we'll be inserting it into all copies of the Prophet before

they go out. At the top, it'll say 'Special Insert—Secrets Revealed.' Then—"

"Harry, I don't think 'Secrets Revealed' is good," said Kingsley. "It sounds too sensational. It cries out not to be believed."

"It gets straight to the heart of the matter," protested Xenophilius. Harry had a feeling that Xenophilius was not going to be happy with many decisions made at this meeting, but felt he had to include him, as it was his printing press that was making this possible.

"Yes, it does," responded Kingsley, "but that's a different question than whether it'll be believed. This has to be written in the way the Prophet would, the same style. We'll be asking, expecting, people to believe that this is a special section of the Prophet. We have to be very careful."

Harry turned to his right. "Mr. Blackstone, what do you think?"

The man answered instantly. "'Special Section' rather than 'Special Insert.' 'Insert' sounds like it was put in by outside hands, which it will be, but we do not want people to know that. As for the next words, I recommend 'Uncensored by the Ministry.' This will cause it to be widely believed, because it has the ring of truth. Most people already believe the Prophet is censored by the Ministry."

"Which it is," put in Tonks.

"In fact, Miss Tonks, it is not," responded Blackstone confidently. "The Prophet has always self-censored; it tries to please those in power." Kingsley glanced at Tonks and nodded his silent agreement.

"Okay, 'Uncensored by the Ministry' it is," agreed Harry. "Then the big headline: Torture At Hogwarts. Three pictures below that, of Carrow, Yaxley, and Goyle, all in the act of torturing students. Then the headline of the main article..." He looked around for the outline Hermione had written, and read, "Dark Arts Professors Introduce Unforgivable Curse as Curriculum and Punishment."

“Isn’t that a little too... mild?” asked Tonks. “It seems like it should be stronger, considering that it’s such a heavy accusation.”

Malfoy spoke. “Like Shacklebolt said, we need people to believe it. Better to err on this side rather than to sound like a screaming tabloid.”

Nobody else commented, and Harry went on. “First paragraph: In news so stunning and dramatic that special measures were required to get it to our faithful readers at all, The Daily Prophet has learned that since former Head of Slytherin House Severus Snape became headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, some professors hired by Headmaster Snape have used the Cruciatus Curse against students as a form of discipline. More than two dozen students have reported having the Curse used against them for trivial violations of school discipline, or for no valid reason at all.”

“Sounds good,” said Kingsley.

“I strongly suggest,” said Blackstone, “that the ‘former Head of Slytherin House’ reference be omitted, regarding Headmaster Snape. This should not be presented as a House vs. House issue. The reference is likely to alienate a number of citizens who are former Slytherins; they will not want torture to be occurring at Hogwarts, but they may become defensive if they feel their former House is being blamed.”

“Out it goes,” agreed Harry; he caught a surprised look from Hermione, who had written it.

A clearly annoyed Xenophilius spoke up. “Mr. Potter, will you be following this gentleman’s every suggestion?”

Not wanting to be impolite, Harry regarded Luna’s father calmly. “Pretty much, yes. Maybe not automatically, but if no one can persuade me that he’s wrong, then yes.” Feeling a need to explain himself further—he appreciated the use of Xenophilius’s printing press, and didn’t want to agitate him—he went on, “The thing is, we’re not trying to sell papers. We’re trying to achieve a political objective: to make people support this government less, to put

pressure on them while not provoking an all-out war. And, to stop torture at Hogwarts. We're aiming at a very small target, and Mr. Blackstone knows a great deal more than anyone in this room about how to hit that target exactly."

Blackstone showed no reaction to this, but as he didn't have eyes, his reactions were often hard to discern. Malfoy looked satisfied, Ron and Hermione surprised, and Xenophilius trying to control his unhappiness. Clearly, he thought of this as a field in which he should be considered the expert.

"Okay. Now, the second article on the front page, which will be above the middle... I'm sorry, Mr. Lovegood, what did you call it?"

"Above the fold," supplied Xenophilius.

"Yes, thank you. Above the fold, the headline: Many Signs Point to Return of You-Know-Who. The article goes on to list—"

"Excuse me for interrupting, Leader Potter," said Blackstone, "but I believe that this is a very bad idea."

"I see. Well, what do you suggest for the headline?"

"I mean that the article itself should not be published."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Ah. Well, sir, I'm afraid you're going to have to convince me of that."

Blackstone's voice turned noticeably flintier. "I do not 'have to' convince you of anything, Leader Potter. Ignore my advice at your own peril."

Well, diplomacy was never my strong point, thought Harry. "I apologize, sir, I chose my words poorly. I'd appreciate it if you'd explain why this article shouldn't be published."

There was no outward indication that Blackstone had been placated, but his tone returned to his normal one. "A few minutes ago, you

rather succinctly stated the purpose of this endeavor, so I need not repeat it. Implicating the Dark Lord does not achieve this purpose.”

“Why is that?” asked Kingsley, who Harry could tell was also not happy at the prospect of scrapping the article.

“The people of the wizarding world do not want to believe that the Dark Lord has returned, and the Dark Lord also does not want them to believe it. Without explicit, undeniable evidence, they will continue to deny it. Many would continue to deny it even in the face of undeniable evidence, short of seeing the Dark Lord with their own eyes. They may not want to believe there is torture at Hogwarts, but they will, especially if the Hogwarts side of this operation is successful. A small number would also believe, already believe, that the Dark Lord has returned and is controlling the government. But most would not. And not believing this article would put the entire supplement in doubt in their minds. A few broad hints that a darker power is responsible for this would not be amiss, but no more than that should be done. If this article is run, I am confident that the overall effectiveness of this operation would be seriously compromised.”

Unhappy, Harry paused. He didn’t want to think that people couldn’t be persuaded that there was torture at Hogwarts and that Voldemort was back at the same time. “Malfoy?”

Malfoy looked surprised to be asked. “Of course, I agree with Mr. Blackstone.”

“Draco,” said Blackstone sharply but gently, “the Auror Leader wants your opinion, not an echo of my opinion.”

Malfoy thought. “Remember, Potter, I told you about two weeks ago that I thought an uprising wouldn’t work, because people wouldn’t want to get involved. That’s why they’d rather deny he’s back: because if he is, they feel bad about ignoring it, they’d think they should do something. But they don’t want to, so they deny it. Then they won’t want to believe this article, which takes away the credibility of the whole thing.”

Harry sighed, then looked at Kingsley. "You clearly don't like it, Harry, and I can't say I do either. I don't agree with Blackstone and Malfoy 100%; I think there's more room for doubt on this than they represent. But I can't deny that there would be risks. Some people would react as they suggest; it's just a matter of how many. Remember, Fudge already announced that he was back, shortly before Scrimgeour took over."

"And even then, there were many who didn't believe it," pointed out Lupin. "And now, a year and a half has passed with no overt sign that he's back. Personally, I think that's a big part of the reason he's kept his head down for such a long time. Partly because he's been gathering forces, but also because he wanted to give people time to forget the announcement that he was back. Now, most people think it was just a false alarm. Put that in this paper, and it'll be like, we've heard this before, but where's the proof?"

Hermione spoke up. "The pictures come from the victims' Pensieve memories. Couldn't we do the same thing with Harry's memories? Yes, I know they can be faked, but I would think people can tell a real one from a fake one."

Malfoy looked at her and responded. "If you don't want to believe something, all you need is a reason, even if it's not a good one. And the fact that Pensieve memories can be faked is a good one. The only reason it works for the torture thing is that we'll have a few dozen living, breathing witnesses.

"It's all about what people see as their interests," Malfoy went on, now focusing his attention on Harry. "It's not in their interest to know that the Dark Lord is back, because then they feel they have to do something. They aren't immediately affected by anything now. Only the Muggle-borns are, and that's okay with them. But their children's interests are their own, and their children being tortured is really going to anger them. That's why this was such a good plan—now, you really thought of it yourself?"

Harry gave him a wry grin, with a 'very funny, now get on with it' look.

“That’s why this was such a good plan, because it motivates people to protect their interests. But shoving the Dark Lord in their faces doesn’t appeal to their interests.”

Ron protested. “Surely people must know that if he’s back, that’s not in their interest, because he’s going to change society in a way that’s not good for anyone who isn’t a Dark wizard.”

Malfoy tilted his head as if to acknowledge a minor point. “I should have said, it doesn’t appeal to their short-term interests. People are much better at looking out for their short-term interests than their long-term ones, especially when they conflict. In this case, it’s the frog-in-the-cauldron thing. He takes power, vents his followers’ desire for someone to persecute by letting them have the Muggle-borns, which most wizards don’t protest because of the already existing anti-Muggle-born feeling. Then, over a few years, maybe even ten, he slowly turns up the temperature of the Dark influence on the Ministry and society. Maybe they’ll try to make it so that torture is an accepted form of interrogation. Up until a hundred years ago, it used to be. By that time, people will be ready to accept things that they’d recoil from in horror right now. It’s all about timing.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. “I am impressed, Draco,” said Blackstone. “An excellent analysis, which I fully endorse.”

Malfoy seemed touched, though trying to cover it. “Thank you, sir.”

“Okay, you’ve convinced me,” said Harry unhappily. “The article is out. I suppose that knowing that torture is happening at Hogwarts will cause some people to conclude that it’s what’s-his-name’s influence, and it’s better if they reach the conclusion on their own.”

“Exactly,” agreed Malfoy. “I was thinking that, too.”

Harry turned to Blackstone. “Mr. Blackstone, assuming all goes as we think it will with this, if you were what’s-his-name, what would you do after this?”

“I would back down,” replied Blackstone. “A short-term retreat in the furtherance of long-term goals. I would order Headmaster Snape to

ensure that all torture ceased, and install as Defense Against the Dark Arts professor a current Auror, for a pre-designated period of two years. The Dark Lord has overreached, and your plan quite capably exploits that overreach.”

“Do you think he’ll do what you just said?”

“No, I do not. I think he will, through his surrogates, dispute the veracity of the claims in some way. In the end, he will be forced to make a choice: back down, or tighten his grip in such a way as to anger some segments of the population. I find it more likely that he will do the latter, after which the time will be ripe for further attempts to undermine his authority.”

Harry nodded. “It’s all about timing,” he said, glancing at Malfoy.

“Quite so,” agreed Blackstone.

“Now, the next article—“

“Potter,” interrupted Malfoy, “I wrote one this morning I’d like you to look at.” He handed Harry a piece of parchment.

“Headline: Malfoy Reportedly on the Run,” read Harry, who looked at Malfoy in obvious surprise. Malfoy gave him a ‘go on, read it’ hand gesture.

Harry read out loud. “Prominent Hogwarts student Draco Malfoy, widely expected to be chosen as Head Boy in what would have been his seventh year at Hogwarts, has apparently decided to forego the final year of his studies. He has not appeared at Hogwarts since he was seen escaping from there, guiding a severely injured Headmaster Albus Dumbledore to safety, in the wake of a strong attack on Hogwarts that was barely beaten back by forces loyal to Dumbledore. A few Dark wizards were apprehended in the aftermath of the attack, as was reported in the Prophet at the time.

“Malfoy’s father Lucius, a high-level advisor to former Minister Cornelius Fudge, abruptly withdrew from public life in June of last year. Around the time of his son’s birth, the elder Malfoy was

suspected of having been a Death Eater and supporter of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but was welcomed back into society after persuading the authorities that his actions had been taken under magical duress.

“A source who saw Lucius Malfoy six months ago related that Malfoy appeared haggard and unhealthy. ‘He put up a brave front, but compared to the confident and powerful Lucius Malfoy I’ve seen in the past, this was a shell of a man, defeated and desperate,’ the source told the Prophet. Whether this is related in any way to his son’s actions is unknown.

“Another source, who refused to be identified for fear of coming to harm but known to the Prophet to be highly reliable, told the Prophet that Draco Malfoy was seen a month ago in the company of Harry Potter, who also has not been seen publicly since June. This would be a surprising development, as the two students were the most prominent at Hogwarts, and well known to be highly adversarial to each other. ‘They came to blows more than once last year,’ said the source. ‘I can’t imagine what would have made them join forces.’”

Harry found himself grinning. “This is very good.”

“I’m glad you’re perceptive enough to understand that,” said a deadpan Malfoy.

“Is this really something you want to be widely known?” Ron asked Malfoy.

Harry decided to answer. “I think the idea is it doesn’t increase his danger, since the one he’s in danger from already knows this, or suspects it. But the main thing is, I love how subtle this is. A lot of people won’t get it, but clearly, Malfoy’s written it with the idea that the reader will conclude that his parents suffered because he helped Dumbledore, and why would they suffer for that? Since the article mentions that his father used to support what’s-his-name, the conclusion is obvious without being too obvious. The article says that what’s-his-name is back and active, but it’s subtle enough that the reader will congratulate himself for being smart enough to figure it out.”

“Page one?” asked Hermione

Malfoy shook his head. “Page four, left side column. Visible, but—“

“Not obviously drawing attention to itself,” said Hermione. “I get it.”

The conversation went on for another hour as they discussed the rest of the articles. When Harry finally called a halt, everyone stood; Xenophilius stood more abruptly than others, and walked out of the room in a mild huff. Harry exchanged a glance with Luna; she let him know without words that she would talk to her father, and left the room.

People slowly exited, until there only remained Harry, Ron, Hermione, Malfoy, and Blackstone. “What’s with that guy?” wondered Malfoy in distaste.

“He is one of the many people, Draco, who believes he is more important than he is,” said Blackstone. “He fancies himself a veteran newspaperman who influences many. Strange as it is, he does not realize that his publication is read by many at the Ministry as an unintentional humor magazine, a parody of the type of magazine like Witch Weekly. I saw his estimate of his own power slowly decrease throughout the meeting.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “I did the best I could.”

“You did well, Leader Potter,” Blackstone assured him. “You were respectful while not allowing him to dilute the content of what you are doing.”

“But doesn’t he know how stupid he looks?” asked Malfoy.

Harry had a feeling he knew the reason, but he wasn’t going to reveal personal matters about Xenophilius that he learned during his visions after leaving Japan, when he sought information on how to defeat the dementors.

To his surprise, however, Blackstone answered. "He has had personal tragedies, Draco. Two wives and another daughter, dead before their time. Such things can have a terrible impact on a person's life, affect him in unpredictable ways. In this case, it seems to have distorted his sense of reality, taken him along this... sad path. In other circumstances, he would be laughed at. As it is, he is... pitied. Some who knew him subscribe to his publication as a form of charity. Such people, Draco, are best humored if possible. They may, as Leader Potter found today, have their uses."

Harry found he didn't like it put that way. "Well, sir, to be honest, I view it more as hoping not to take away his dignity. I would try to treat him the same way even if he wasn't of use."

Malfoy rolled his eyes; Blackstone tilted his head. "It is a... kind impulse," said the old man, with emphasis on the word that suggested that he might disapprove of it. "It hurts nothing so long as nothing is sacrificed in the service of it. Though I would point out that had it not been his printing press, he would not have even been included in the meeting. If concessions are made to such things, however, you may be taken advantage of others who would exploit your kindness."

Harry respected Blackstone for his knowledge and ability, but found that he didn't like the man's attitude. People were tools that one manipulated to serve one's own ends, viewed in terms of their usefulness. Even a fundamental human value such as kindness was nothing but a luxury, to be dispensed so long as it didn't get in the way of power.

"I'll keep that in mind," said Harry. "Excuse me." He turned to leave, followed by Ron and Hermione.

After they were out of the cave, Ron looked at Harry. "Nice man." They continued walking, away from the cave and out into the clearing.

"Wouldn't want to be kind to people," agreed Hermione.

Harry shrugged. "His help is very important, so..."

"He's only doing it for Malfoy," pointed out Hermione. "Malfoy won't be safe until what's-his-name is dead, so he helps Malfoy. If his interest was helping what's-his-name, he'd help him. No conscience."

"We don't know that," said Harry. She gave him a sideways look. "Not for sure," he added, silently conceding that she could well be right. "His help could save lives, so we take what we can get. The Leader portraits have talked about this kind of thing. Everyone has an agenda, everyone looks out for themselves. The Leaders think that I should have the ability to look at the world in the way Blackstone does. Of course, not to look at it only like he does. But then again, do we know that's the only way he looks at it? Yes, he's a Slytherin type, and he seems that way, but he'd hide it if it was true, especially from people like us, who he doesn't know well. And he obviously has affection for Malfoy. So, just because he comes across this way, who are we to decide?"

"Well," said Ron, "my gut tells me that Hermione's right. But I get your point. Doesn't matter anyway; like you said, we'll take what help we can get."

Hermione turned to Ron. "Could you help me put it together?"

"Sure." They headed off, leaving Harry alone.

* * * * *

The next switch would happen the next night, which was a Monday; the operations would be carried out early Tuesday morning. They would arrive in the other dimension at a quarter to midnight, and leave a few minutes after noon; it would be the first time a switch lasted more than twelve hours. As usual when a switch was mostly at night, they tried to sleep on the island to prepare.

He woke up after sleeping for six hours, and sat on the sofa in his tent, reading a book. Fifteen minutes or so into his reading, he heard Luna's voice in his head, asking if he minded if she stopped by his quarters. He replied that of course, he didn't mind.

When she came in, it was easy for Harry to tell that she had been crying, relatively recently. "What's wrong?"

She sat next to him, looked at him sadly, and took his face in her hands. She leaned in and kissed him, gently and lovingly. While pleased, he was mystified, and knew his face showed it.

"I watched your Auror Leader test."

Now he understood, but didn't quite know what to say. He took both of her hands in his, and gave a light shrug. "That's why I went to Japan. Actually, I just got on a plane without knowing where it was going. I just couldn't be around anything that was familiar."

"I can understand that. Now that you mention that, I don't think I've heard much about your time in Japan."

They both moved to more comfortable positions on the sofa, still holding hands. "It turned out to be a good thing for me to do, and I was lucky; I ended up in the home of a good man, who was happy to have me there and understood Western culture and customs. He had a son about my age, and we got to be friends. For the most part, life was quiet, I learned a lot of things, and nobody knew that I was, you know, 'Harry Potter.' That was really a good thing for me right then."

"How was their culture?"

He chuckled. "I could spend hours telling you the differences, and probably will someday. It's very hierarchical, and respecting older people is a big part of it. Even if someone's two years older, you treat them with respect, and they do with you if they're younger."

"That reminds me, why are you so respectful to that man, Blackstone? You always call him 'sir,' and so forth. Is it because of your time in Japan?"

"No, not exactly. The first time I saw Malfoy talk to him, he talked like that. I saw that this was someone Malfoy had a lot of respect for, and since I'm trying to get along with Malfoy, I decided to treat the man the same way. Now, knowing him a little, I get the feeling that he

considers it natural, that he deserves it. He may not be Japanese, but I think that hierarchy is more important for him than it is for most people. Respect is probably a big deal for him.”

She nodded. “I see what you mean. My father doesn’t feel very respected these days. Before the last switch, I talked to Draco. I asked him if he would mind trying not to roll his eyes so much when my father is around, or when he speaks. He seemed a little annoyed, but he said he would try.”

“I’m sorry that your father feels the way he does. I’m just not sure what to do about it. Did you talk to him after the meeting?”

“Yes, I did. He wasn’t happy, but I was able to calm him down. I think it’s just hard for him to accept that he doesn’t have control of what comes off of that press, because he always has.”

Suddenly curious about something, Harry changed the subject. “Why did you decide to look at the Auror Leader test?”

“I was saying to my father that you sacrificed a lot to become Auror Leader, and I realized that while I know the general information, I didn’t know the real story. And since you and I are together, and I should know you as well as I can, I should know that, since it would have a big impact on you. I knew it would be hard to watch, but I didn’t know it would be that hard. It was terrible.”

He nodded. “Yes, it was. I wonder what I would have done if I was older, had a wife and children. Could I still have done the same thing?”

“I think you would have,” she said gently. “I think that’s the point of the test, that it gets down to the person’s essential character. This is yours, that you’ll do the right thing, no matter how painful it is. I don’t think I could do that.” She looked into his eyes, and again he saw that... specialness—he knew it wasn’t a word, but it was what came to his mind—that quality, whatever it was that made her Luna, what he had come to value as a friend before falling in love with her. “All I can say,” she said earnestly, “is that I’ll do anything I can to make your life less difficult while you do the things you need to do.”

He was touched, partly by her words, but more by her eyes, and what he knew was in her heart. He had never before seen such emotion directed towards him; the closest thing he could recall was from his mother, during the Auror Leader test. Not knowing what to say, he leaned over and kissed her. It turned into a long, lingering kiss, driven equally by love and passion. After they finished, he looked at her, and the thought occurred to him that he loved her. He thought of telling her, but hesitated, for reasons he himself wasn't sure of.

"Do you want to go outside, wait for the switch with the others?" she asked.

"An hour before, yes. But right now, I'd just like to stay here with you." He shifted to a half-reclining position. She leaned against him, her head on his shoulder, arm across his chest. Rarely, he realized, had he ever felt so contented. He also had a thought he hadn't had before: even if we can't figure out how to stop this, and we end up living in the other dimension permanently, at least she and I will still be together.

* * * * *

They started to work on the fake Prophet section as soon as they switched, but it wasn't until 1:30 a.m. that the articles had been double-checked and the layout set. Kingsley and Tonks had acquired a few copies of the real Prophet to use as a point of comparison for lettering and general style matters.

When it was ready, Harry asked Xenophilius to print out ten copies of the insert as a test. It took Xenophilius ten minutes to set it up, but once he did, the copies printed out in only a few seconds. Hermione picked them up and distributed them. Harry and the others tried to read them quickly while checking for errors or other problems. It took fifteen minutes, and he could detect none.

"Looks good to me," said Harry.

"I can't find any problems," agreed Ron. "Malfoy?"

“Not finished yet, but so far, it looks okay.”

Hermione spoke. “I don’t see any errors, but what’s this thing at the bottom? Page four, I mean, at the very end.”

Harry looked at the back page, and saw at the bottom a pattern, running along the bottom from far left to far right, of what appeared to Harry to be sideways ‘8’s, connected to each other. Then he realized it was more like an infinity symbol than a sideways ‘8’; it had sometimes confused him in school.

“Okay, I see it. Mr. Lovegood, what’s this all about?”

Xenophilius shrugged. “It is simply a publishing symbol that indicates that one has reached the end of this particular publication.”

Harry had a suspicion that he needed to verify. “Does this appear at the end of each issue of the Quibbler?”

“Of course,” said Xenophilius.

“I’ve never seen this before,” said Malfoy, who seemed to be trying, and largely failing, to keep disdain out of his tone.

Xenophilius sniffed, “You are quite a young man, and I suspect that you have had other things to occupy your time than reading such publications.”

“Well, I haven’t read the Quibbler,” admitted Malfoy, again struggling to avoid being impolite. “But I have read others, and I’ve never seen that.”

“Are you really sure you would have noticed that if it was there?” asked Harry.

Now, Malfoy showed his annoyance. “No, I can’t say it for certain.”

Harry looked around. “Remus? Kingsley? Tonks?”

Xenophilius glared at Harry. “Young man, you could just simply take my word for it.” The three who Harry asked, out of Xenophilius’s field of vision, all shook their heads.

Now it was Harry who had to struggle to be polite. “Sir, this is very important. We have to be absolutely sure that—“

Harry cut himself off as two newspapers flew into the room, Summoned by Kingsley. He picked up one Prophet as Lupin looked at the other. Finding what they were looking for, both held up the last page of the papers to everyone else; there was no such line of symbols at the bottom. Harry looked at Xenophilius.

“Well, I do not know why those two papers do not have the symbol, but I assure you that it is common practice. It will appear peculiar if this does not appear. So, all other things being as they should be, we should get on with the printing, should we not?”

Harry repressed a sigh; this was going to take a lot of diplomacy, which didn’t come easily to him. “Mr. Lovegood... I do understand your point. But the problem is that it’s the Prophet we’re trying to imitate, and two recent issues of the Prophet don’t show this symbol. So it seems that the safe thing to do is just to do it exactly as it is here.”

Xenophilius was trying to control his anger. Pointing at Blackstone, he said, “Mr. Potter, that man is the political expert, and you took his advice without hesitation or argument. But here, I am the only one with publishing experience, and you seem predisposed to ignore my point of view.”

Harry wondered if Luna would get involved, but she remained silent. “Sir, if these issues of the Prophet had the symbol you put there, I would put it in with no hesitation. But they don’t, and you’ve said you don’t know why. If you could give me a persuasive reason why these two Prophets don’t have the symbol but ours should, I’m all ears. But you haven’t done that.”

“Mr. Potter, every publication I have ever made has had that symbol at the end of the issue! A string of infinities, it symbolizes the

limitlessness of knowledge, and that no publication truly ends, it is simply constrained by space and time. It is utterly suitable, and does not relate to the content. From your point of view, it is irrelevant.”

Harry couldn’t help but visibly wince. How stupid was this man? “It’s extremely relevant, sir. Any hint that this is anything other than the genuine Prophet will ruin this project. We are trying to stop the torture of Hogwarts students. All it would take is a few people to notice that the Quibbler always runs this symbol, then they would tell the Prophet, which would run a story the next day that would persuade most people that it wasn’t the Prophet. What we need, Mr. Lovegood, is for this to be so good that even if the Prophet denies it was involved the next day, most people will believe it was really them, and they just have to deny it. This could have the opposite effect—the credibility of the accusations would be destroyed, and more torture would occur. Nobody would believe future accusations. Do you want that on your conscience?”

Harry believed that he had given it his best shot, but apparently it wasn’t enough. “It would not happen that way,” Xenophilius stubbornly insisted.

One more try, thought Harry. “I think it would, sir, and I’m the one who has to make decisions like that. I’m the Auror Leader. People can die because I made a mistake. I have to do what I think is best, and if someone suffers for that, then it’s on me, I have to deal with that. But I can’t make decisions like this on the basis of ‘take my word for it, it’ll be all right.’ I’m responsible. It’s your printing press, and I can’t force you to do anything. But I can’t do this unless I have confidence that it’ll work, and if that symbol goes there, I don’t have that confidence. So, please, I’m asking you to run it without the symbol.”

“If you do not have confidence in my word, then I don’t see why you should be asking anything of me,” said Xenophilius coldly.

Harry closed his eyes and bowed his head. He turned to Kingsley. “Okay, we’re not doing this, we have to think of something else. The rest of you, with me, to the main meeting area.”

“What??” exclaimed Malfoy in disbelief. “After all that work?”

Harry headed off, speaking as he walked. "Having it not work would be worse than not doing it at all—"

"Potter, it's not like he can stop us—"

"No," shot back Harry, turning to face Malfoy. "Nobody is forcing anyone to do anything. Let's go."

"The fact that he's your girlfriend's father—"

"Has nothing to do with it, Malfoy, and you're starting to piss me off. Let's go."

"Well, Merlin knows I wouldn't want to piss off the Auror Leader," muttered Malfoy sarcastically as they filed out, the Aurors and Lupin ahead of them, Ron and Hermione behind. He expected Luna to stay, perhaps try to persuade her father, but she left with them. When they approached the meeting area, Luna pulled Malfoy aside and started talking to him. Glancing up to see through Luna's eyes, he saw Malfoy looking surprised, then nodding.

The conjured seats were still there, and everyone sat, except for Luna and Malfoy. "Okay," said Harry. "I was wondering if it would be possible to do this at the Prophet. What does everyone think?"

Kingsley spoke. "It would be extremely risky, I would think, and require much more direct... force, I suppose you could say. It would involve the forcible removal of the people responsible for the printing equipment, and so forth. I just don't think it's doable. Put it this way: it would require substantially more coercion than you're willing to exert here." Malfoy entered the room and sat.

"I hate to say it, Harry, but Malfoy has a point," said Ron. "Coercing him would really seem to be the lesser of two evils. I mean, this could prevent torture, and we're going to let it go by because he's behaving like a five-year-old child who's going to take his ball and go home?"

To Harry's surprise, Blackstone spoke. "Mr. Weasley, I believe that your friend the Leader has done exactly the right thing. The Auror

Leader's power is based on persuasion, not force. Some people simply cannot be persuaded, and the Leader must deal with that. To begin resorting to force in this kind of situation would lead down a road that would end with citizens fearing the Leader because they know he will use force when reason fails. It would utterly undermine his authority. Leader Potter knows this not intellectually, but rather, instinctively."

"It just feels wrong," agreed Harry.

"That is another way to put it, yes," said Blackstone dryly. "And Mr. Weasley, though yours is a somewhat apt analogy, it is not so much a matter of childishness as it is ego. He staked his ego on this one point, trivial though it may be, and having done so, to surrender would be a diminution of his ego, which has already taken a beating. In situations like this, the best solution is usually to find a face-saving way for the other person to back off. Unfortunately, in this situation, such a way did not exist."

"Too bad," said Malfoy. "This was a good idea."

"Yeah," agreed Harry. "It's especially unfortunate, since I don't get that many of them."

Malfoy and Ron chuckled. "I understand your humorous intent, Leader Potter," said Blackstone gravely, "but as a general matter, self-deprecating humor may not be appropriate for the Auror Leader, whose position and respect derives in large part from his image, how he is seen in the eyes of his fellow citizens."

Harry tried not to roll his eyes; he felt like a child being reprimanded by a strict but well-meaning parent. "I understand. So, let's have some ideas on what to do next."

Ten minutes into the discussion, Luna entered the room. "He's changed his mind," she announced to all while looking at Harry. "He'll do it your way."

There were a few surprised expressions, including Harry's. "Well, that's good. Let's get started."

“There is one thing,” she said. “He’s... kind of embarrassed about what happened, and he doesn’t want to have to talk to anyone. He said he’ll package up bundles of 200 and have me Summon them out of the room to you.”

Harry shrugged. “Okay.”

Malfoy scoffed. “Which allows him to do Merlin knows what to them. Probably every ‘o’ will be changed to an infinity symbol.”

Luna calmly regarded Malfoy. “He changed his mind sincerely, Draco. He isn’t going to do that.”

“I hope not,” replied an unconvinced Malfoy. “So, what happens after the Prophet staff find out what we’ve put into their paper?”

“Well,” said Kingsley, “I’d imagine they’ll start notifying their superiors up the line, and within a half an hour—maybe sooner—Mr. Hardington, the Prophet’s publisher, will become a much-sought-after individual. He’ll know nothing about it, of course, and he’ll be appalled. He’ll question his staff, who’ll also know nothing; I wouldn’t be surprised if in the end Veritaserum is used, assuming they can lay their hands on any. In the meantime, as it’s the focus of the special section, somebody will be sent to Hogwarts in short order, at which time the sparsity of attendance in the Great Hall should alert everyone that something is up. By then, of course, it’ll be too late.”

“And then,” added Malfoy, “all hell will break loose, and it’s impossible to say what’ll happen.”

“Exactly,” agreed Harry. “Should be interesting.”

While they waited for 4:00 a.m., Harry Apparated to the Room of Requirement to meet with those who were assisting him there. In order to avoid Filch—he should be sleeping by now, thought Harry, but you never know—he Apparated Ernie to the entrance to the Hufflepuff area. Ernie gave the password and escorted Harry inside; Harry installed the Portkey—for each common room it would be a large metal chain, symbolizing being held prisoner—securely from

five feet above the floor to inside the floor, and cast an extra spell he'd learned from Hermione to make it very difficult to remove. He then repeated the procedure for the Slytherin and Ravenclaw common rooms, this time Apparating directly into them, which he could as he'd been to both before. Gryffindor was last. He made sure to put up a magical sign near each Portkey reading 'Portkey to go home,' and he left twenty copies of the Prophet special section in a prominent place in each common room.

He returned to the cave just before 3:45 to find that Xenophilius had just finished the last copies. He Apparated with Kingsley under the Cloak to the Prophet offices, to the room they would need to be in to put in the inserts. Papers would roll through on a conveyor belt toward a space into which inserts were stacked. This would cause each paper to magically fly open, and an insert would shoot from the bottom of the insert pile into the open paper, which would close again. At the rate of two papers per second, it would take an hour and a half to finish. The first ones would go out on owls to the farthest-flung locations, then gradually to the closer locations, and the last ones would be physically transported in bulk to specific locations. Harry and Kingsley stayed in the room under the Cloak for almost the whole time, wanting to make sure no one noticed. It was almost the most boring ninety minutes he'd ever spent, but at the same time he had to be on high alert, ready for someone to come in, notice that something was wrong, and try to do something about it. Fortunately, they were left alone.

Satisfied that the papers would go out as planned, Harry decided to go back to the Gryffindor common room, sit in a corner under the Cloak, and observe what happened.

Seamus and Neville were in the common room; it was safe for them, as Harry had installed Portkeys to the Room from the Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff seventh-year boys' dormitories, so they could go there, and from there to the cave, without having to creep around and get past Filch. Seamus and Neville found everyone who came out of the dormitories starting at 6:00, and asked them to go back and wake up the others.

When there was finally a small crowd in front of them, Seamus and Neville spoke. "Listen up," said Seamus. "Some of you have already been reading these special sections of the Prophet, which came out today. They show what's been happening at Hogwarts. The main reason this is being allowed to happen is that our parents don't know it's happening. Some of us have told our parents, in owls, and we haven't gotten responses, so we have to guess that the owls are being intercepted. What's happening today is a way for us to fight back."

Neville now spoke. "The torture has been happening to more Gryffindors than other Houses, but to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff as well. In each common room, there's one of these Portkeys. The student leaders in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff are now giving a talk similar to what we're saying now. What we want to encourage you all to do is to take that Portkey. It'll take you to a park, where other transportation will be available to get you to your homes.

"The purpose of this is as a protest against the use of the Cruciatus Curse that's been happening here," continued Neville. "It's supposed to be very illegal, but they've been teaching it and using it. You all know what happened to Seamus a few days ago. That man is gone, and so are the Carrows, but we have no reason to think that the next one they send will be any better. Tell your parents that what's written in the Prophet is true, because as you know, it is. They may not believe you, and Snape may deny it. Tell them everyone at Hogwarts knows it's true. Tell them you don't want to go back until Snape promises there'll be no more torture at Hogwarts. It's supposed to be a school, not a torture chamber."

Seamus spoke again. "Now, what we're suggesting you do is against Hogwarts rules. I can't promise that you wouldn't get into any trouble for it. But if everyone does it, there's less chance that any one person will get in trouble. The important thing is that this is the right thing to do, and Gryffindors do what's right. Any questions?"

A fifth-year girl asked, "Where are Harry, Ron, and Hermione?"

Seamus grinned. "I don't know. But one thing you can be sure of is that they're doing something, something that's good for wizarding society. We have to try to do the same thing."

"Think about it this way," suggested Neville. "If you were parents, would you want your children to go to a school where torture was used? Where it might be used against them? We have to stand up for ourselves!"

Murmurs of agreement spread through the crowd. "Should we take our trunks with us?" asked a fourth-year boy.

"I'd say no," answered Seamus, "because you probably will be back, though maybe not soon. But I would say, don't leave anything here that you couldn't stand to lose. Really, though, it's up to you."

People started to head back to their dormitories to change clothes and get ready; others stayed and talked. Harry was impressed with Seamus and Neville; both obviously had leadership skills. He silently headed for the seventh year boys' dormitory, where he took the Portkey to the Room, and from there to the cave.

There was no one in the main meeting room, so Harry decided they must all be at the pickup site. He walked down the main hall, checking each room to be sure; no one was in the cave at all except Xenophilius. "Leader Potter," the man called as Harry walked by.

Harry stopped and turned to face him, making an effort to remove any emotion from his face. Silently, he waited for Xenophilius to speak.

"I..." Emotions, mostly shame, played across his face as he hesitated. "I would like to apologize for my actions before. I still believe I was correct, but I should not have taken the attitude I did. In addition to having saved my daughter's life, you are the Auror Leader. I should do as you ask even if I do not agree with it. My apologies."

Harry wished Xenophilius realized that he was wrong, but he would take what he could get. "I understand, Mr. Lovegood, and I appreciate it. I'm not sure, but we may be needing to use that again."

“You have only to ask,” said Xenophilius with a slight bow.

“Thank you. Sorry, I have to get going.” Harry walked down the hall, stopped in the room he was sharing with Malfoy—Ron and Hermione had their own room—and took the small vial among his possessions. Grimacing in revulsion at what was to come, he opened and drank it. He felt his body stretching, and when it finished, he was a slim, sandy-haired man slightly taller than himself. The hair had been taken by Hermione from a random Muggle.

He Apparated to the Muggle park; Kingsley had used his connections in the Muggle world to arrange that the park be put off limits to anyone until noon, and had then put Muggle-repelling charms around the site. No Muggles would see anything.

People were pouring through the Portkeys as Harry walked over to Kingsley. Ron and Hermione were also disguised, but Kingsley, Lupin, and Tonks were their normal selves. Sidling up to Kingsley, Harry said, “Kingsley, it’s me.”

“Ah, there you are. People are asking questions, and—ah, there it is.”

Kingsley pointed as the Knight Bus slowly came into view; Tonks’s job had been to arrange this transportation. “Amazing that that bus can hold three hundred people,” marveled Harry.

“The magic of apparent space,” nodded Kingsley. “They just usually don’t have so much call for it. How much did you end up paying for this?”

“A hundred Galleons, which gets us exclusive use until 3:00 p.m.,” said Harry, as students began to run by, having seen the bus. “Highway robbery, as the Muggles would say, but I told Tonks not to haggle too much. One of the luxuries of having money.”

The door of the bus opened. “All aboard, all aboard,” called the driver, a different one than Harry had remembered. “One at a time, don’t push. This may take a while. Six levels, no problem.”

An older boy walked towards them, and Harry saw to his surprise that it was Blaise Zabini. "Excuse me," he said to Harry. "Are you one of the organizers of this?"

"That's right," answered Harry, remembering to change his voice so he wouldn't be recognized.

"I have a few questions. Can I speak to you, in private?"

Harry was surprised—as far as Zabini knew, Harry was a random person—but decided to accommodate him. "All right." They walked off to a nearby bench, far enough away not to be overheard, and sat.

Zabini gave Harry a crooked smile. "How's it going, Potter?"

Harry did a double-take. "Sorry, who?"

Chuckling, Zabini shook his head. "Nice try, but you're not a good actor. I'm not saying how, but Polyjuice Potion doesn't fool me. Now, do you want to talk, or not?"

This is annoying, thought Harry. It could also be dangerous; mentally, he went on full alert. "If you insist, Zabini. I must say, I'm surprised to see you here. You're Head Boy, after all, and this is more or less a protest. You could lose your badge."

The Slytherin tilted his head. "It's called keeping your options open. I can always say that a lot had gone before me, and I went for the purpose of making sure nothing happened to them. Or, I can be part of this glorious protest."

"So, torture's okay with you?"

"As long as it's not happening to me," said Zabini offhandedly. "To be honest, I don't like it at all. It's crude and counterproductive. Just right for Goyle and Crabbe, that type. Not going to stick my neck out to stop it, of course. You write that paper?"

Harry shrugged. "Me? I'm just some guy."

Zabini grinned. "As you say. I'm impressed that you got into our common room. I'd love to know how, though I doubt you'd tell me. My assumption, of course, is that it was Malfoy. Tell him I said hi."

"So, you're not going to sign up with the Dark Lord?"

"Not my style," said Zabini. "I mean, like any Slytherin, I like power; I just don't like my hands drenched in blood. I'm funny like that. See, at least I knew that about myself. Malfoy would've been Head Boy, but he bit off more than he could chew. Thought he could do it. Killing's not for everyone. I saw the stress he was under last year. Now I know why."

As Zabini talked, it occurred to Harry that he had to try to see the situation as Blackstone would, and as the Leaders' portraits encouraged him to. What was Zabini's motivation? He hadn't yet gotten to the point, if he had one. If he didn't, Harry realized, then the purpose of talking to him was simply to let him know that Zabini knew who he was. Why? An implicit threat? That he could blow Harry's cover any time he wanted to? Harry glanced over at the bus; people were still boarding, and some were still coming through the Portkeys. There was time. Then again, maybe Zabini was making an overture; he might decide it was in his best interest to help Harry.

"So, tell me, Blaise, how would you like this to end? With the Dark Lord in power, or in the ground?"

With a small grin, Zabini shook his head slightly. "Ah, it's very Gryffindor of you. Which side are you on. You should know, Potter, that—"

Harry caught on. "It's hard to say right now who'll end up on top, and you'll stay on the side that looks good, while not losing the option to switch sides if something changes."

Zabini was mildly impressed. "So, you do know. Then why'd you ask?"

"Thought it might be different. You never know. You might be another Malfoy."

"No, I'm smarter than him. At least, it appears that way now. You know why?"

Harry found he understood. "He's committed. You still have options."

"Not bad, Potter," said Zabini, with a mild degree of condescension that Harry tried to ignore. "You might not have made a bad Slytherin."

"Thank you. Except one thing. Malfoy's going to end up on the right side."

Zabini's eyebrows rose slightly. "He is, is he?"

Harry nodded confidently. "He is. You know why?"

"I'd be so interested to hear." The sarcasm was light, and Harry sensed that Zabini was actually interested.

"Because the Dark Lord's decision-making capacity is... let's say, not all it could be. I know why, and it's a secret, but there's evidence. Think about it. He wants to hide that he's controlling the government, he's not attacking anyone but Muggle-borns, but then he allows children to be tortured? How does he think the parents are going to react? Does that make sense?"

Zabini nodded thoughtfully. "No, it doesn't. I'd actually had that thought. This would have happened anyway, you know. Christmas break was in a week and a half, kids would have told their parents. You didn't have to do this."

"This makes it an issue," Harry pointed out. "He has to respond. The smart thing would be to back off, but I'm betting he tightens his grip. And if he does, it gets harder to pretend he's not running the government."

"True, but I don't see how that helps you."

"The point is to keep up the pressure," said Harry, remembering his chess lessons. "Keep him on the defensive. He'll make mistakes. The

more I annoy him, the harder he'll try to get me. That also will cause mistakes."

"But he doesn't know it's you. Does he?"

"No, he doesn't. The time may come that I'll let it be known. But only when the timing is right."

"When will that be?"

"I'll know," said Harry confidently. "So, do you believe in prophecies?"

Zabini grinned. "That is the question, isn't it." He looked over his shoulder. "Well, Potter, most of them are on board, so I should go. It's been an interesting chat."

"Yes, it has. I trust I can count on you to keep it between ourselves?"

Zabini gave him a sly grin. "Why would I?"

"Your own self-interest."

Again, Zabini was surprised. "And how would that work?"

Harry understood that Zabini was trying to get him to reveal more information by making him explain why Zabini shouldn't tell anyone. "Letting it be known that it's me would... annoy me, and limit your side-switching flexibility in the future."

Zabini gave a light shrug, as if he didn't find this very persuasive. "I'll keep that in mind." He stood, and Harry stood with him.

Harry decided he needed to make it clearer. "You should also keep in mind... that it wasn't Malfoy in your common room." While he spoke, and after, he gave Zabini a hard stare. He was sure Zabini would get the message: if I can get into your common room, I can get into your dormitory. While you're sleeping.

Zabini slowly nodded, clearly understanding. "That's what I thought." With another nod, he turned and walked away.

* * * * *

Shortly after noon, ten minutes before the switch back, Kingsley Apparated into the cave. He found Harry, Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Malfoy in one room. "I got a report from an Auror I keep in touch with on the inside. He said that the Ministry's going crazy, the shit is really hitting the fan. The number one question being, naturally, how did this happen. The number two question being, is it true about torture at Hogwarts? The Ministry didn't know, and they don't like it. They, and the governors, already called in Snape. Snape apparently put them off, saying there had to be an 'investigation,' and he refused to answer any questions, no matter how simple."

Malfoy nodded. "Playing for time, to wait for instructions from the Dark Lord."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Kingsley. "As for the special section and its impact on parents, it's too soon to tell. I'll be able to tell you more when you come back. Which is tomorrow, I think you said?" he asked, looking at Hermione.

"Yes, that's right. From 3:50 a.m. to 5:12 p.m."

"Amazing. You're almost spending more time here than there."

She nodded. "The switch after next is the first time that'll happen."

"Is there any plan to do anything different with our Harry?" asked Kingsley.

Harry shook his head. "I'm looking into it," said Malfoy. Ron gave Harry a look, one that suggested that Malfoy shouldn't be trusted with the task, as his actions had caused Harry's problems in the first place. Clearly, though, Ron knew that Harry didn't want Malfoy to be needlessly aggravated.

"Oh, Potter," said Malfoy, "I finished looking at the memory of your meeting with Zabini. It was interesting."

“Did you know he could see through Polyjuice Potion?”

“It’s funny. In fourth year, occasionally he’d say something like, there’s something wrong with ‘that professor,’ he’d never use Moody’s name. When we asked him about it—I didn’t bother to do it more than once—he just acted like it was only a feeling. Then at the end of the year, he was all, ‘I was right, wasn’t I?’ Like he wanted us to think he had some special power. Obviously, he’s got some artifact.”

“Well, it’s good that we now know for sure he has it,” said Harry.

“Yeah, it surprised me a little that he gave that up, just to talk to you, when he had nothing special to say. I suppose he just wanted to make contact, try to get what he could, and hope he could hold something over you.” Grinning, Malfoy added, “I liked that bit at the end, where you basically said, don’t screw with me. He clearly wasn’t expecting that.”

“Well, I’m learning, I guess,” said Harry resignedly.

“Yes, you are,” said Malfoy, intending a compliment. “You shouldn’t act so put out by that. You should learn these things.”

“I suppose,” said Ron, “that taking to it naturally, rather than learning it reluctantly, is the difference between a Slytherin and a Gryffindor.”

“That’s a good way to put it,” agreed Hermione.

“Wonder if a Slytherin’s ever been Auror Leader,” said Ron.

“Actually, after Harry became Leader, I looked it up,” said Hermione. With an annoyed look at Malfoy, she went on, “I saw that smirk, Malfoy. I’ve put up with plenty of your comments, you can restrain yourself—”

“I was restraining myself,” protested Malfoy. “It was a smirk instead of a wisecrack.”

“Oh. Well, then, I appreciate that,” she said sarcastically. “Anyway, there were three Leaders before Hogwarts was established. After that, there’ve been thirteen, including Harry. Every single one, a Gryffindor.”

“Not a surprise,” said Malfoy. “Even a Slytherin Auror is a rarity. Of course, a large percentage of Ministers and undersecretaries are Slytherins. Just means the Hat knows what it’s doing.”

“I guess so. But it’s interesting that—“

“Harry,” said Hermione, “it’s only a few minutes. We should get back in there.”

“Yes, that’s right, I have to be lying down,” agreed Harry.

“I’ll go too,” said Malfoy. “Need some sleep.”

“Okay,” said Harry. “See you tomorrow.” He entered his ‘room’ in the cave, lay down in the conjured sleeping bag, and stared at the cave ceiling. In a minute, he was in his tent on the island.

He talked with the others about the events of the past twelve hours, then went to his tent, planning to sleep. Luna asked him through their necklace if he minded a visit; he told her to go ahead.

“You don’t have to ask, you know,” he said after she came in. “You should feel free to walk on in.”

“Well, all right,” she said. “It just feels strange.”

Lying on his bed, he started to get up, but she waved him off. “I’d just as soon lie down and talk, actually,” she said. She lay down on the bed next to him. A queen-size bed, it could hold two comfortably, but with little extra space.

He rolled over towards her and took her hand. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay. I wanted to thank you for how you dealt with my father. I could see how frustrated you were, but you still gave him every chance.”

"It wasn't easy," he acknowledged. "How did you persuade him to finally do it?"

She looked unusually serious. "I asked Draco to bring his Pensieve. I showed him my memory of your Auror Leader test."

Harry's eyebrows went high. "Wow. That's pretty... heavy."

"I know. I didn't really want to. But the way he was acting... sometimes he gets... in his own world, and he doesn't see how things look from the outside. I thought that if he knew what you had done, he would realize what it means to be Auror Leader, and it would pull him out of his own point of view. And it did. But it wasn't only so the paper could go out; it was also that he wasn't having the respect for your position that he should have had."

Harry was silent for a minute, thinking about it. A thought suddenly came into his head. "How did you show him that, anyway? It takes an hour to watch, and you were only gone for about ten minutes or so."

She gazed back serenely. "I'm sorry, but Draco helped me with that, and he asked me not to tell anyone. Of course I trust you completely, but I don't want to break my word to him."

The answer came to Harry quickly. "Oh, the artifact. The white one, that stops time. The Malfoy on our side loaned it to me."

"Well, I suppose I didn't break my word, then," she said with amusement.

He smiled. "No, you didn't."

They lay in silence; she moved closer, and they held each other, him on his back, her nestled in his shoulder, hand across his chest.

Harry's eyes started to close; only now did he realize how tired he was. Luna was breathing heavily, nearly asleep. He thought about moving, but he was comfortable.

The next thing he knew, he was on his side. He looked over; she was on the bed next to him, wearing the same clothes as she'd been before. "How long have you been awake?" he asked.

"Only a few minutes. I think my waking up woke you up."

He looked at his watch. "Wow, it's been a little over five hours." Slightly embarrassed, he added, "I wonder what people will say, since they know you've been in here all this time."

"You shouldn't worry about that," she gently chided him. "But if they must know, tell them the truth. Just say that we slept together."

He laughed. "Yes, I suppose we did." He leaned over and kissed her. "It was pretty good."

"Yes, it was," she said matter-of-factly. With a tiny grin, she added, "But I think it'll be even better next time."

He smiled broadly. "I think so too."

* * * * *

He slept another two hours, this time alone, before the switch, which would come in the middle of the night. Some of those on the island intended to sleep through the switch, keeping more normal hours, while Harry and those with him would continue to make efforts to be awake for the entire time spent in the other dimension. He sat with them at the table until a few minutes before, when as usual he went to lie down in preparation for the switch.

He saw the ceiling change, and sat up. To his surprise, Kingsley was in the room. "You ought to come to the meeting room."

Harry stood. "What's going on?" asked Ron. Looking at Kingsley's glance in response, Ron nodded. "When we get there. All right." Luna joined them on the way to the room.

In the room already were Malfoy, Blackstone, Tonks, Lupin, and to Harry's surprise, Bill. Harry nodded in greeting. "Hello, Bill. What's up?"

Bill took a breath before answering. "All Weasleys except me, Charlie, and Ron were captured last night. They're now in Azkaban."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 14, Azkaban: In a dangerous raid on Azkaban, Malfoy and Luna find themselves in mortal danger after taking impulsive action, disregarding Harry's instructions.

From Chapter 14: Before Harry could answer, Malfoy exploded in anger. "Damn you, Potter! You said you told me everything you could do, but you kept this from me!"

Chapter 14

Azkaban

Harry exchanged a startled glance with Ron. "How?" asked Harry in disbelief. "They were supposed to be staying at Grimmauld Place!"

"They hadn't quite gotten there yet," said Bill. "The last thing I heard was that Mum was getting them ready to make the move, but it was taking a while. She thought they were well-hidden enough at Muriel's that there was no danger."

"So what happened?" asked Ron, agitation and concern clear on his face.

"I'm not sure; I just heard about it after it happened. But I have a guess. A few weeks ago, Fred was over, and he said that he thought it might be worth a try to contact Percy, get him on our side. That it would be clear to him by now that You-Know-Who really was back, and that he was essentially working for him by remaining where he was. I told him I wouldn't do it, that it was too dangerous. I'd guess that he decided to do it anyway. He meets Percy quietly, Percy agrees to visit the house, Percy was unknowingly under observation by Dark wizards, and they found out where the Weasleys were. However it happened, they're in Azkaban now, including Percy."

Ron turned to Harry, who knew what his friend would say before he said it. "Harry, we've got to get them out of there."

Malfoy scoffed. "Oh, bust prisoners out of Azkaban? No problem! Just that it's never been done successfully. I don't think even the Auror Leader can pull that off."

Ron stared at Malfoy. "No one's ever been able to kill dementors before, either."

Malfoy's jaw dropped. "You can kill dementors?" gasped Lupin. "How?"

Before Harry could answer, Malfoy exploded in anger. “Damn you, Potter! You said you told me everything you could do, but you kept this from me!”

Defensively, Harry found himself raising his voice. “You asked what my Auror Leader powers were. This isn’t an Auror Leader power. It’s just a spell.”

“Same thing—“

“It is not the same thing—“

“You knew I would want to know!”

Harry’s mystification was clear on his face. “Why would you want to know?”

Malfoy threw up his hands in frustration. “Idiot! My parents are in Azkaban!”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that?”

Malfoy’s face had the ‘how can you be so stupid’ look. “It’s common knowledge! It was in the Prophet the day after it happened, for Merlin’s sake!”

“We aren’t from here, remember? And when we mentioned your parents, you got really angry, and said it wasn’t to be talked about!”

Highly frustrated, Malfoy close his eyes for a few seconds. “What did you think happened to them?”

“Killed, or tortured into insanity.”

“It never entered your mind that they might have been put into Azkaban?”

Harry shrugged. “The way you were being about it, the... intensity, I guess, of your attitude, made me think it was something they weren’t going to be able to come back from.”

“And you wouldn’t have an... intense feeling if your parents were thrown into Azkaban because of something you did? Weasley here looks pretty intense to me!”

“He just found out,” Harry pointed out. “I don’t know what to say, Malfoy. It just didn’t enter my mind. Maybe that means I’m stupid, but it’s just a fact.”

Heatedly, Malfoy pressed him, “And if you had thought of it, would you have told me that you might have a way to rescue them?”

That’s the question, isn’t it, thought Harry. The fact was that he thought Malfoy’s parents more than deserved to be in Azkaban, just not for the reasons they’d been put there. But he knew he had to be very careful what he said to Malfoy, and he hoped that Ron wouldn’t say something in the heat of the moment about it being inappropriate to consider the rescue of his family and the rescue of Malfoy’s parents to be equivalent. The thought gave him an idea.

He turned to Ron. “Go to the Room of Requirement, get Neville, and bring him here. Of course, make sure there’s someone to hold the room open.”

Ron nodded, got up, and left the room. Harry turned to Malfoy. “To be honest, Malfoy, I’m not sure. I think I would have told you, because I’d know you’d want to know. I might have even agreed to try to go get them. But you need to know that this spell isn’t simple, and it isn’t fast. You don’t just point it at a dementor and it dies. I don’t even know for sure that we can do this, and if we do, it’ll be highly risky. We could easily fail.”

Malfoy was still angry. “I think you’re lying, Potter. I don’t think you’d have been willing to—“

“Draco,” interrupted Blackstone. “The Auror Leader is telling you the truth, as he sees it. He admitted he does not know what he would have said. Your emotion, understandably, is interfering with your judgment.”

"You mean the Auror Leader never lies?" Malfoy challenged Blackstone.

"No, I do not mean that," replied Blackstone calmly. "But he does not lie to those with whom he is conducting operations, to his allies. If he were the kind to do that, he would fail the test. You know that."

Malfoy turned away in frustration, now unable to take his anger out on Harry. "Why Longbottom?"

Harry explained the nature of the spell. Wide-eyed, Malfoy turned to him again. "You mean, I won't even be able to do the spell?"

"Not without three people with whom you have mutual implicit trust, no."

"Great," Malfoy muttered. "I'm going anyway, though."

"Nothing's been decided yet," Harry pointed out. Malfoy and Hermione wore equally surprised expressions. Harry sighed. "You know I want to, Hermione. You know I don't want the Weasleys to spend one more minute in there than they have to. But we're not going unless there's a plan, and a reasonable chance of success." To Hermione, he added, "You remember, the last time I ran off with no plan, it didn't work out so well. I'm not going to do the same thing again."

Ron and Neville walked in. "So, when are we going?" asked Ron. Neville nodded in agreement, as Harry realized that Neville, his girlfriend in a terrible place, was no less eager to go.

"As I was saying, we're going to have a plan first. And we're not going to do it this switch. The next one, at the earliest."

"Why?" asked Ron in disbelief, looking as if he'd been betrayed.

Kingsley spoke. "I'd do the same thing, Ron. At the switch, you'll be able to talk to your George and Ginny, who'll be on the island with you. You can get information, see their memories in the Pensieve. That information will be incredibly important. We can form the general

plan here, today, but when you see that, you can make the plan much more specific. That'll increase your chances of success."

"And my family is just supposed to suffer in the meantime?"

"Better to suffer for four days and have a good chance of rescue, rather than one day, and have a poor chance," countered Kingsley.

"Do you have any idea how bad it is in there—"

"Ron!" exclaimed Harry, his tone one of a reprimand.

Ron looked to Hermione questioningly. "Before the Merlin first ceremony," she reminded him.

Ron winced slightly, then looked at Kingsley. "Sorry."

"If you're referring to what I think you are," said Kingsley warily, "that's not known by many people."

"Your counterpart told us," explained Harry. "There was a reason."

"I have to wonder what else he's told you," said Kingsley unhappily. "But yes, I know that very well. A few days is bad, but can be recovered from. We'll only have one chance at this. The fact that your spell needs four people, and can only do one dementor at a time, isn't good. It's not hard to imagine that you could be overwhelmed. You'll have to plan this carefully."

Harry nodded. "Tell us the tactical situation regarding Azkaban."

"First of all, it's fairly far out at sea, maybe fifty miles," said Kingsley. "Most of the shore is rocky, but there are a few small areas that are more like a beach, pebbles rather than sand. The island is roughly circular, with a diameter of half a mile. The prison, which is within a roughly square-shaped tower, has only about sixty cells. It would be more crowded than usual right now. Cells are right next to each other, about six rows of ten. The bars aren't as close to each other as in Muggle prisons, but enough to stop a human getting through."

“But not a dog,” Harry recalled.

“Exactly.”

“So it’s the cells, not the walls, that stop people from getting out? I mean, Sirius was able to get past the walls somehow.”

“There are gaps,” agreed Kingsley. “But it’s not even the cells, really. It’s what the dementors do to you. There might be up to six people in one cell, and with clear minds, they might be able to work together to escape. Even so, of course, where would they go? But since their minds are so muddled, they can’t make a reasonable try at escape. They’re suffering what Muggles would describe as clinical depression. Worse, in a way.”

“I understand. Okay, the first question is how we get out there—“

“Harry,” interrupted Kingsley, “are you talking about releasing just the Weasleys and the Malfoys?”

“I hadn’t gotten that far,” Harry admitted. “Why?”

“Because you’re talking about killing all of the dementors, right? Well, suppose you do. You can’t just take the Weasleys and Malfoys, whoever else you know isn’t a criminal, and then leave. You have to take them all. Because with no dementors there, there’s no one to give the remaining prisoners food and water. They’d die within days—“

“They must have a normal way to get food onto the island,” pointed out Hermione. “It would just have to be distributed by humans instead of dementors.”

“And can we be sure that the Ministry will continue sending those supplies, after the dementors are gone? They might consider it a security risk. Nobody would want to be the one to do it, and people might starve in the meantime. There’s a saying in shops, both wizard and Muggle: You broke it, you bought it. If we destroy the system at Azkaban, we become morally responsible for what happens afterwards.”

Harry sighed. "Okay. So, we fly out there, set up a Portkey, and let everybody out? Where do we put them?"

"It's a good question," Kingsley agreed. "Also, some of the prisoners may be, not to put too fine a point on it, insane. They may not come with you even if you open the cell door and tell them to come, and it may be difficult to coerce them. So we may have problems with that, too."

"First, let's think about the tactical operation," said Harry. "Flying and putting the Portkey up works, right?"

"There aren't many other possibilities, but yes. Dementors aren't that fast, you can outfly them. Of course, you have to land to do the spell—"

"Why can't we do the spell from the air?" pointed out Ron.

"No," said Harry firmly. "You and I could, but Hermione and Neville aren't experienced fliers, and there's a big element of risk in the air. It has to be on the ground."

"We'd be willing to take the chance," said Neville, whose face reflected that he couldn't disagree with Harry tactically, and felt ashamed that his lack of ability limited the type of operation available.

"I'm not, Neville," responded Harry. "Only if it was an absolute last resort would I consider it, and I think it can work from the ground. We just have to work out what we'll do if we're under attack from a hundred dementors at once. That's the key thing."

After a short pause in which no one spoke, Harry resumed. "Okay. What I'd say right now is that we need to do some serious thinking about this. Nobody's ever tried this, but the reason they haven't tried it is because there was never this possibility of killing dementors before. It's a completely new tactical situation, and there could be ideas we wouldn't normally think of that could really help us. We need to have everyone throw out ideas, and see what happens."

"It seems to me," said Hermione, "that our plans would depend on how many people are doing this. The more, the better."

"I'd think," said Neville, "that there'd be no shortage of volunteers, especially when they find out who was taken. We might get twenty or thirty—all of us on the island, and most or all of the DA members not on the island."

Harry turned to Luna. "You should stay behind, be my eyes and ears—"

"You don't need eyes and ears back here," she said, with an unusually stern expression. "You don't want me to come because of the danger. I've told you not to think of me as a girlfriend in this situation. This is like when you didn't want Ginny coming with you for Horcrux-hunting. It wasn't fair to her, and it wouldn't be fair to me. I'm going with you. Besides, you need me."

He frowned, confused. "Why you especially?"

Hermione understood. "As backup."

Luna nodded. "If one of the four of you is incapacitated, I can step in. At least, I think I can." She looked at the others expectantly.

As her boyfriend, he didn't want her along, but as Auror Leader, he could definitely see the point. He turned to Ron, Hermione, and Neville. "You know what the spell involves. You have to totally trust the person, with your life, and feel close to them. You need to be completely honest—don't worry about her feelings, or mine—because if it doesn't work, we could all die. Are you 100% confident that this spell will work with Luna substituting for any one of us?"

To Harry's mild surprise, none of them even hesitated; all nodded or said 'yes.'

"Okay, then. Now, before we start with the ideas, I did want to find out what's happening with our Hogwarts operation from yesterday." He looked at Kingsley and Blackstone.

“The short answer,” said Kingsley, “is that You-Know-Who is responding aggressively. This morning’s Prophet, under his influence... well, here’s the headline.” He handed Harry a paper containing two large, bold headlines: Sabotage at Prophet, Chaos at Hogwarts.

“To save you the time of reading it, it’s a full-throated hatchet job. Enemies of the government take over the Prophet to spread misinformation aimed at discrediting educators, children put at risk by reckless activists who infiltrated Hogwarts. The most important thing is that they said that two students, a third and a fourth-year Slytherin, went missing in the ‘chaos.’ We know that’s not true, since we deactivated the Portkeys before we left the park. We assume that they found two Slytherins who didn’t go—they gave the names, both are children of Ministry workers, maybe under pressure not to contradict the official account. It’s obviously a propaganda offensive, trying to put us on the defensive.”

“Personally, I regard this as a highly favorable development,” said Blackstone. “Only the ignorant will believe this, and it represents further overreach on the part of the Dark Lord. I have been getting unofficial reports, as has Mr. Shacklebolt, that as you intended, children have been telling their parents about the use of the Cruciatus Curse. Parents have been talking to each other. It is too soon for a consensus to have formed, but the desired effect is occurring.”

“But won’t some people believe this?” asked Ron.

“Yes, I did refer to those who are ignorant,” replied Blackstone. “They can be found in any country. They are useful for forming mobs, if the government desires, but lack any other real use. Those with any degree of knowledge and power understand that the more politically sensitive a story is, the less it can be believed. A story about Quidditch has credibility; a story about the Ministry does not.”

“Why does the Prophet try to please the Ministry?” asked Harry.

Blackstone turned to Harry. “Because it benefits the publisher and the reporters of the Prophet to do so. They socialize with the rich and powerful, are wined, dined, given gifts, and treated to tidbits of

political gossip, which of course must never be printed. They are made to feel part of the power structure. Printing a politically unappealing truth would cause the politicians to shun them, removing their favored status. Some younger reporters are idealistic, and try to report the truth; they are not allowed to write political stories until they have a true understanding of the situation.”

Kind of sad, thought Harry, but at least it’s good to understand that. “I could always find those kids, if they’re at Hogwarts, and produce them publicly,” suggested Harry.

“I would not recommend that,” said Blackstone. “This is just what they put in the Prophet; you would get nothing done if you spent your time responding to their fabrications. Now, if they turned up dead, their bodies shown publicly, that would be a different matter. The point is that it is actions that should be responded to, not words. The false Prophet—please forgive the unintentional pun, as I loathe puns—would have been useless without the Hogwarts side of the operation. To the extent possible, every operation should deal the Dark Lord’s side some kind of real blow, with impact, even if it is only the removal of some operatives, as was the case when they followed me.”

Harry was about to speak, but Malfoy beat him to it. “Mr. Blackstone, just out of curiosity, how would you evaluate the Azkaban operation we’re going to do, in terms of its impact in the fight against the Dark Lord?”

Blackstone sounded a little surprised, though his face gave no indication. “It is an interesting question, Draco. I understand that you and Leader Potter would be determined that this operation occur even if its impact was negative, but the question should be considered.” He paused and thought for a few seconds. “I would say that it will have a positive impact, its largest strength deriving from something you would consider incidental: the destruction of the dementors. The Dark Lord and his allies will be shocked that this is possible, and they will wonder what else you have up your sleeve that they are not aware of.

“In this vein, if I may make a recommendation that is somewhat in contradiction to that of Auror Shacklebolt... I would suggest the

following: that rather than allow everyone to escape, when the dementors have fled or been killed, you and your people conduct an inventory of the prison. Visit every cell, get the names of the individuals, write them down. Those who you are sure are there for political reasons, feel free to release. But there are some genuine criminals in Azkaban, and dozens of them turning up in wizarding society will provide your opposition an enormous—and true—public relations argument. ‘Look at these people, they released murderers and other dangerous criminals!’ There is no secure place to put them. Leave the Portkey, and inform the Ministry that the prisoners must now be provisioned without the supervision of the dementors. Having done this, if the prisoners starve and perish, it will be the Ministry’s responsibility, not yours.”

Harry didn’t care for the tone of the last sentence, as if it hardly mattered whether the prisoners died or not, but he knew he had to ignore it. “Kingsley, what do you think?”

“I admit I’d been thinking of releasing the prisoners into wizarding society as a tactical thing, dumping a huge problem into their laps. But the gentleman has a good point about how it would look. What he said is worth consideration.”

“Another thing I feel worthy of consideration,” added Blackstone, “is the political environment after the mission is accomplished. There will be some awe in the political world that a way has been found to kill dementors, and as I have said, the Dark wizards would be on the defensive. Assuming political reaction from the Azkaban operation is positive, it is possible that the time would be ripe to play our trump card: The Auror Leader could announce himself, give a speech in Diagon Alley or the Ministry Atrium, and say that he and the Aurors will turn their attention to fighting the Dark influence in our society. He could assert personal control over Hogwarts and responsibility for its security; many parents would welcome this, and send their children back. He might even persuade the Council to change Ministers. My point is that under the right circumstances, the power of such a move would be at its highest.”

As soon as Blackstone’s intent had become clear, Harry had been thinking furiously about his answer. He felt strongly that he didn’t

want to announce himself, but he himself was not sure of the reason. After Blackstone finished speaking, all eyes turned to Harry. Trying not to betray any expression, he just nodded. "I'll think about that, if everything goes okay with Azkaban. So, let's get back to that. Tactical ideas. What's the best way to do this?"

* * * * *

The meeting broke up after an hour; a general plan had been decided, with final details to be worked out pending further information from Ginny and George after the switch. Harry shuddered every time he imagined what they, and the Weasleys, were going through at that moment. At least for George and Ginny, he thought, there was the knowledge that they'd be back on the island after a certain amount of time. The other Weasleys had no such luxury, and might very well believe that they'd be there for the rest of their lives, condemned to a slow descent into madness. The knowledge redoubled his determination to get them out of there—quickly, but more importantly, without fail—and to kill or permanently drive off their tormentors.

He saw Malfoy and Blackstone head out of the cave and slowly walk into the area of sparse trees and shrubbery nearby, farther and farther from the cave. He knew he shouldn't, but he decided to try to listen as he sat on the ground against the large trunk of a long-fallen tree. Ron came out to talk to Harry, but Harry put him off, saying he just needed some quiet right then. Ron wordlessly returned to the cave, and only then did it occur to Harry to wonder whether Ron had needed to talk about his family situation.

Ten minutes later, Harry finally heard something. "This should be okay," said Malfoy. "I just don't want Potter overhearing. He's got special hearing, but we're a few hundred meters away from the cave by now. I'd think that should be enough."

"What did you wish to talk to me about, Draco?"

"A few things, sir, but the main one is about my father. I want to rescue him, of course, but I'm also concerned about how he'll react to me. He ended up in Azkaban because I betrayed the Dark Lord. I'd be very surprised if he wasn't tortured before it happened, and who

knows, maybe my mother as well.” Harry could hear the pain in Malfoy’s voice. “I mean, I know I did the right thing, and I know you said before that it wasn’t my fault. The question is, will he see it that way?”

“I can understand why this troubles you,” said Blackstone gently. “I simply cannot know the answer to your question. He may very well blame you, or he may blame himself for placing you in such a position. In a way, it will be a test of character for him. It is to be hoped that he will realize his mistake, and understand that he should blame no one but himself. If he blames you, it will be a matter of his failure to take responsibility for his own actions.”

“But I’m his son. Isn’t a son supposed to be loyal to his father, right or wrong? The bottom line is, I didn’t do what he needed me to do.”

“Listen to me carefully, Draco; this is very important. What he ‘needed you to do’ was kill, and as I said, killing does not come easily. Of course, I feel that it should not be done at all, and it should most definitely not be imposed on another, never mind someone so young.

“I dislike saying this, because I still have affection for your father, for the man I hoped he would become, and may yet become. But the effect he had on you is not unlike that of a man who accumulates a large debt, and willingly or not, passes on the responsibility for that debt to his son. By following the Dark Lord, he placed himself in thrall, and by extension, his family as well.

“I say this not to criticize or blame him, but to make a point. You must not feel responsible for being unable to pay your father’s debts; such a thing should never be expected of a son, not to mention such a psychically crushing debt. I have said this before, both to you and to your father, but I say it again: Power is desirable, but violence in achieving it is not necessary. It is possible to gain power by violence, but such a means is crude, and not worthy of an intelligent and sophisticated person. Violence degrades society, and makes it unpleasant to live in, and unsatisfying to rule.

“You see, a man who has killed finds it difficult to look in the mirror; this is our psyche’s way of telling us that murder is wrong. A man who

uses violence to achieve power cannot then enjoy it, because his psyche has been... mutilated, let us say; in order to justify what he has done, he has convinced himself that cold-blooded murder is justifiable. A man who believes that will know that only the naked exercise of violent power will prevent the same thing from happening to him, and so he can never rest easy. Your reluctance to kill Dumbledore can be seen as a type of self-preservation. That instinct is there for a reason. If your father blames you for possessing it, then he has placed his self-interest ahead of yours. This may not help you if you face his wrath, but it is the truth.

"I know it may be difficult for you to accept what I say. You may wish to ruminate on it for a time, as it will not be immediately that you meet him. Also, keep in mind that he will have been in the company of dementors for six months, a very long time. He and your mother may not quite be themselves. They will need time to recover."

There was a long silence. "I understand, sir. Thank you. The other question I had was about Potter. You wouldn't have seen this, of course, but when you talked about him announcing himself as Auror Leader, he had a look on his face that said it was the last thing he wanted to do. It seemed to be all he could do to pretend that it didn't bother him. I wondered if you had any idea why that was."

"Yes, I noticed as well, Draco. I have learned to associate changes in the power levels I perceive with emotions, and that he does not want to announce himself was quite clear. As to the reason, I can only guess; it may even be that he himself does not know.

"All I am sure of is that he sees such a thing as being wrong in some way. The reason is either unknown to him, or highly personal; as you noted, he does not wish to share it. If he does know, he believes that it will not be considered a sufficient reason by others, even if he himself finds it so."

"Strange," said Malfoy. "You don't suppose, do you, that it's something weird, like since he's not the Leader in this dimension, that it would be dishonest to claim that he was? Something like that?"

“We really do not have enough information for such speculation; those who know him best would be better equipped to make that judgment.”

“I’m worried, sir, because what if the time comes when he needs to do that, and he refuses for whatever reason it is?”

“I am confident, Draco, that if it becomes necessary, he will overcome whatever is troubling him, and do the right thing. Remember what one must endure to become Leader in the first place. In the meantime, I suggest that you try to place yourself in his shoes, and speculate about what his reason is. You will probably not succeed, as it is likely connected to his own unique experiences, but it is valuable as a learning exercise.”

Malfoy and Blackstone went on to another subject, and Harry stopped listening. What, he wondered, was the reason? He knew he had to figure it out, because the issue might soon come to a head. But first things first, he thought, as he got up to go talk to Ron.

* * * * *

There would be no operations that day. They focused on preparations for the secondary aspects of the upcoming Azkaban operation: temporary living quarters for those they rescued, what if any announcements to make, how or whether to be sure that the Ministry would take care of those left behind. Harry and the others had reluctantly accepted Blackstone’s argument that releasing all of the prisoners would be a disaster. They discussed another problem: that clear-minded prisoners would now have more time and ability to plan and execute escape attempts. Nothing was decided, but Blackstone emphasized Kingsley’s point that if they radically changed the system of incarceration, they had some responsibility for what the system became. Harry firmly pointed out that whatever it became, it would be less bad than it was now.

Katie Bell had procured a new supply of fake Galleons, and Hermione went about charming them as she had in fifth year. Angelina then distributed them to all DA members; the timing was fortuitous, as it would be helpful to be able to signal everyone when the time came to

go to Azkaban. Before the switch back to the island, Harry did some thinking, then talked to Kingsley about going public as Auror Leader; he was interested to find out whether the two versions of the same man would have the same opinion about the matter. As usual, he made sure to be lying down in advance of the switch.

In the tent, he leaped to his feet and quickly walked outside. Neville was hugging Ginny tightly, and Angelina was holding George. Harry sat, deciding not to speak until George or Ginny was ready to say something. A grim silence prevailed.

Finally, George let go of Angelina and turned toward the others. "You know, it's really something... I know dementors can be killed, and I'm sure there's a rescue operation on—"

"Next switch," confirmed Harry.

"Thought so. But even knowing that, it was very easy to almost give up hope. I swear, even murderers don't belong in that place. No one does."

"I assume you told the other Weasleys that we'd be coming?"

"Yes, but I don't think they believed us. If I could almost give up hope, they definitely could."

"You weren't separated?" asked Ron.

George shook his head. "All in the same cell, and it's not exactly big. There does seem to be a crowding problem. And from the category of 'it's a small world,' you'll never guess who's in the cell next to us."

It was an easy question, as they knew no other people in Azkaban. "The Malfoys."

"Yes, indeed. Their punishment for Draco deciding not to kill. And before this, I'd have gotten some satisfaction out of it. Serves them right, and all that. But now... not so much."

Harry nodded. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to get a Pensieve memory, for the layout and to help plan the attack—"

"I'll do it," said Ginny, just having disengaged from Neville. She walked around the table, heading for the supply tent containing the Pensieve.

"No need to do it right this minute—"

"I'd rather, just so I don't have to think about it," she said over her shoulder. Harry followed her, and the two entered the tent.

Approaching the Pensieve, she took out her wand. "I hope I can somehow get that wand back, I really like it," she muttered as she extracted the silvery threads from her head and deposited them into the Pensieve. When she was finished, she gestured for him to look.

He hadn't planned to do it immediately, but her manner suggested that he should. He put his hand in.

To Harry's surprise, there were bars on three of the four walls of the cell; only the wall opposite the cell entrance was solid. Looking out of the front of the cell, one could see the large tower wall about fifteen meters outside the cells. The moon, three-quarters full, was visible in the sky. This was good, thought Harry, as it gave him a way to know where the Weasleys were as they approached the island tomorrow.

To Harry's surprise, the scene switched. Ginny was sitting up against the back wall, knees bent vertically in front of her, leaning forward so that her head was almost touching her knees. She looked up and saw Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, leaning against the wall that separated the Weasleys from the Malfoys. They appeared to be dozing.

In the memory, Harry saw Ginny's face, and it was a version of her he never thought he would see. Her face was twisted in rage, hatred emanating from her as though it were a physical force. It was very easy to imagine what memories had been going through her mind, probably for hours. Her... violation at the hands of Tom Riddle via his diary, a trauma that would never have happened without Lucius Malfoy. Being used as an instrument, made to put people's lives in

jeopardy, then tossed aside when no longer useful... almost killed, her life almost used to bring back the life of her murderer... being forced to relive that, thought Harry, would drive anyone to look as she did.

She moved forward quietly; either no one woke up, or no one bothered to look at her, no doubt lost in their own private hells. She sat near the side of the cell against which the Malfoys rested, and reached into her robe. She untied and pulled out a sash, which some robes contained for various possible uses.

Quietly and methodically, she put one end of the sash through the bar above Lucius Malfoy's head and pulled it through, so that she was holding both ends; she then moved it down. Harry's eyes went wide as he realized what she intended to do. Her eyes revealed her state of mind: it was as if she was experiencing the trauma again, probably over and over again, and this was a way to make it stop. She had to make it stop.

She eased the sash down until it was almost atop Malfoy's head, then she gave it some slack so that it moved down in front of his head. When the sash was level with his neck, she pulled it gently. It was around his throat, and she held both ends in her hands. A chill went down Harry's spine.

Perhaps unconsciously noticing that something was amiss, Malfoy opened his eyes and slowly turned his head in her direction; she reflexively tightened her grip somewhat. The red cloth was now slightly tight around his neck, and it was clear that he could feel it.

He looked at her, and in his eyes, Harry could see the toll that six months in the place had taken. He looked like a shell of a man, surviving on pure instinct, gaunt and hollow-eyed. His eyes met hers, and some life came back into them; he recognized her, saw what her hands held, and understood the situation perfectly. To Harry's surprise, he showed no fear.

She moved her arms into a position of readiness to pull tightly. Malfoy noticed this too, but again, had no overt reaction. He finally spoke, in a hoarse voice, not much above a whisper. "It would be a mercy."

She blinked, and it was as if she had just woken from a dream, the 'normal' Ginny taking over from the dementor-addled version of herself. She gasped, pulled one end of the sash until she held all of it, and rolled over onto the dirty floor of the cell and started to sob.

The memory ended, and Harry took his hand out of the Pensieve. Ginny was looking at him, seeming to gauge his reaction. "I've seen your Auror Leader test," she said, by way of explanation. "I decided on the spur of the moment to show you this, before I lost my nerve. I thought you deserved to see it. You may decide to reconsider whether I should be an Auror, and I wouldn't blame you."

Overcome by compassion, he walked over and hugged her. She returned the embrace, and he said nothing until he let go. "I wouldn't judge anybody by what they did, or thought about doing, under that kind of duress. To say it wouldn't be fair is putting it mildly."

"I have a feeling," she said, "that Draco wouldn't agree with you on that."

He understood that she was referring to the likelihood that after their rescue, the older Malfoy might tell his son what had happened. "If that's true, then it'll only be because Draco has never been up close and personal with a dementor. And I can say what I said, because I have. It seemed like Lucius understood."

"It's strange," she said, "I'm never going to have warm feelings for him, after what he did, but in that one moment when I looked at him, I got the feeling that when we're rescued, he'll be different than he was. I mean that I think he'll join us, do what he can to see Voldemort killed. Partly because he'll hate Voldemort for putting him there, but I got the impression that he now realizes that the stuff he did was wrong."

Harry had seen the same look Ginny had, and hadn't gotten that feeling, but he knew that as the one who had been there, she might well be right. "It wouldn't shock me," he said. "I just hope he remembers it after he's been out of there for a while."

"I'd guess he will," she said. "That place changes you."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "C'mon, let's go back out there. I'll go over the rescue plan with everyone."

* * * * *

A few hours later, Harry sat in his tent with Luna, Ron, Hermione, and Kingsley. "I wanted to talk to you all about what came up on the other side, about whether I should announce myself. I want to know what you all think about it." He glanced at Hermione, indicating that he wanted to hear from her first.

She hesitated. "It's hard to disagree with what Blackstone said. I know what you've said in the past about the fact that it's you stirring up the Dark wizards really strongly, but if we pull off this rescue and kill the dementors, that's going to stir them up no matter who did it. But doing this puts a lot of pressure on you, so it's really your decision—"

"Hermione, can I interrupt for a minute?" asked Kingsley, who turned to Harry. "We need to lay this out in the open. There are two facets of this decision. One is the practical aspect, which as Hermione said, suggests that if the Azkaban operation succeeds, it should be done. It seems obvious that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

"The second one, and the one that I suspect weighs more heavily on you, is a personal one. The other Harry is in a coma, and you can't talk to him, can't ask him what he thinks. Not that you don't have some idea of what he'd say. It seems highly likely that, from a personal point of view, he would not want you to do this. Now, if a way isn't found to reverse this switching, and you end up living your lives on the other side, it won't be an issue. But if you announce this, and do manage to get back, you'll have changed the other Harry's life in an irrevocable and unpleasant way. You, Harry, have never liked things being expected of you. He would be expected to become Auror Leader. If he took the test and failed, he would be perceived by some as a failure. If he chose not to take the test, he would be seen as not living up to his promise, letting society down. It would be a burden

he'd carry all his life. And even if he took it and passed, as was the case with you, maybe that wasn't what he wanted to do with his life.

"So, you're faced with a choice similar to the one I was faced with when I made you take the Auror Leader test. Do what you know the person would want, even if it would cost lives, or do what's best for society, when it places a huge burden on someone you care about. And about this, Harry, I cannot advise you, for obvious reasons. This isn't a decision you need advice on. This is like when you let George go to Australia, one in which you look deep into your soul and make a choice." He looked at Harry expectantly.

Harry was silent; he had realized before the switch that this was the reason he didn't want to go public, and he wanted people's opinions of the situation as a practical matter, which was how the other Kingsley had answered it. Looking around at the somber faces of his three friends, he understood that they agreed with Kingsley.

"Hermione, what do you think is the difference between what I can accomplish over there as Harry Potter, versus as Harry Potter, Auror Leader?"

He could guess the sense of her answer from her expression. "Unfortunately, quite a lot. Not that there aren't a lot of people who respect Harry Potter and would follow him as their leader if asked, but as Auror Leader, you'd have power at the Ministry; you could almost single-handedly put a stop to anti-Muggle-born abuses, and that's just a start." Ron nodded as he listened, suggesting that he'd already considered that angle. "It would be a strong blow against Voldemort, and it would almost definitely save lives.

"Also, it would give anything you did legitimacy, like the Hogwarts operation. You wouldn't be an insurgent; you'd be the officially-sanctioned protector of society. You'd have access to resources—"

"Yes," Harry interrupted, "but does it make it any more likely that Voldemort could be defeated? I mean, that's the real question."

Ron jumped in. "It's not the only question. I mean, we're going to rescue my family, and that has nothing to do with beating Voldemort.

Not everything's about that. By doing this, we'd be stopping torture, ending suffering for dozens of people, and stopping a great wrong, the persecution of Muggle-borns. Now believe me, the last thing I want to do is pressure you. I can only imagine how you'd have reacted to this last year, when we were running around the English countryside. But other people are suffering, like my family is. I do think that has to be considered. Sorry," he added with a light shrug.

"No, you're right," said Harry, with a defeated air.

"To answer your question," said Hermione sympathetically, "about defeating Voldemort, I think it makes it substantially more likely. You'd change, in his eyes, from an ordinary 17-year-old who once got lucky to a formidable and powerful adversary, a clear threat to his power. He'd be more desperate to beat you, and that would very likely lead to mistakes on his part. Part of beating him is getting into the same place as him—which isn't easy—and setting up some way to defeat him. I don't know if you could, even with your new dueling skills, take him on head-to-head. Maybe you could. But I think you're going to have to beat him with your mind, not your wand."

Harry decided to ask the difficult question. "What would you do if you were me?"

She answered quickly, causing Harry to think that she'd considered the question already. "I'd do it. We've all made sacrifices for the sake of doing the right thing, fighting against evil. What we'd be imposing on the other Harry wouldn't be enjoyable, but he could manage. He's got plenty of money, so he could live out his life as he chose, out of the public spotlight. As sacrifices go, having people know you could be the Auror Leader isn't the worst thing in the world. I'd even go so far as to say that being made Auror Leader involuntarily is more of a sacrifice than the one you'd be imposing on him."

Harry glanced at Kingsley, whose minimalist reaction indicated that he agreed with Hermione. "Ron?"

"I'd do it too," said Ron. "But one thing I'd like to do is for me and Hermione to leave a Pensieve message for our counterparts, let them register their complaints or objections before we do it. I know they

won't be happy. But we've been through more than they have. We'll let them know how important it is."

They talked for a while longer, but Harry knew that everything important had already been said. Luna stayed afterwards, and they sat on the sofa holding hands. "So," he asked, "what do you think?"

"I think," she said gently, "that you already know that it's the thing to do. We all sympathize with your not wanting to hurt your counterpart, but he's Harry Potter too, just a little younger. You were angry with Kingsley for making you take the Auror Leader test, but eventually you understood, and forgave him. Your other self will understand, too."

He glanced down, and said nothing more. Unpleasant as the situation still was, he found that he appreciated the fact that he knew that she would tell him the truth, even if it wasn't what he wanted to hear.

* * * * *

The next morning, two hours before dawn, standing on a rocky beach on England's east coast were Harry, Malfoy, Kingsley, and Tonks. After the switch, there had been some debate as to who would fly, and who would take the Portkey that Kingsley would set up. Ron and Hermione had wanted to go, but logistically, there was no need for more than four people to make the trip, which would be long and uncomfortable. Two Aurors would go, based on their training and experience; Malfoy would go, mainly because he had loudly insisted on it. Harry wondered how much of Malfoy's fervor for the mission was simply wanting his parents back, and how much was his own feeling of responsibility for their plight. Naturally, he kept such thoughts to himself.

Kingsley set up the Portkey and activated it. "Okay, it's up at this end. First thing I'll do once we get there is set the other side up. Let's go."

All four took off. Kingsley flew ahead with Tonks, while Harry flew a dozen meters behind, and a few meters above, with Malfoy. "Beautiful weather," remarked Malfoy sarcastically as they ascended. It was cold and drizzling, and misty even when not drizzling.

Harry shrugged. "I've flown in worse. And we have magical shields so we don't get soaked. But yeah, blue skies and mild temperatures would be nice."

"So, why isn't everyone flying over?"

Harry remembered that this part of the discussion had taken place on the island. "We thought, I guess the other Kingsley really, that more people flying meant more chance of something going wrong in mid-flight. This is an almost one-hour flight, and I didn't want to think about people like Hermione, Ernie, and a few others who don't have that much broom experience. So, the ones who went had to be those who'd spent a fair amount of time on a broom."

"But are you sure Shacklebolt is going to be able to get the Portkey going before the dementors are on top of us? I mean, if they're swarming around it, it won't be of much use."

Harry nodded. "That was the main problem. We did, of course, consider making this a completely broom-based operation."

"I don't see why it isn't," agreed Malfoy. "More maneuverability, more speed—"

"You mean, you don't know why we didn't do it that way?"

Irritably, Malfoy responded, "Of course I know, I was there at the meeting—"

"You said you didn't see why—"

"It's just an expression. You fall off, you're dead. I understand that. Maybe I should have phrased it more precisely, and said, 'I don't see why you didn't think it was worth the risk.'"

"Speaking as someone who's fallen off a broom because of a dementor, I have a unique perspective—"

“Is this about you, Potter? You’re afraid you’re going to fall off?” Malfoy’s tone strongly implied that Harry was behaving in a cowardly fashion.

Harry bit back the sharp retort that was almost past his lips. “It’s about the mission, Malfoy. Kingsley agreed it was the best idea, the safest. All I meant was that I know how easily it can happen. If this mission only included people like me, you, Ron, and the Aurors—experienced fliers—then it might be worth the risk. We’re faster than them on brooms, and we could stay out of their way. But to kill them, we need Hermione, Neville, and Luna as backup, and they’ve never spent much time on brooms. They couldn’t maneuver like we can, and I don’t fancy risking their lives to gain a tactical advantage. It can be done this way, and with less risk. So, we’re doing it.”

“You don’t have to get all high and mighty about it,” retorted Malfoy; Harry only now realized that his last sentence had contained more than a little irritation.

“I just didn’t appreciate the suggestion that this is because I’m scared—“

“Well, let’s be fair, in third year you were fainting left and right—“

“Goddamnit, Malfoy! I’m responsible for these people’s lives, don’t you get that? Number one thing is, nobody dies! If somebody dies because I picked a plan that was riskier than it needed to be...” He took a breath to calm himself down. Without turning his head to look at Malfoy, he went on, “If I’m scared of anything, I’m scared of that.”

In the silence Harry continued to fix his eyes forward, not wanting to look over to check Malfoy’s expression. Doesn’t matter what he thinks, thought Harry. He’s never going to know what this kind of responsibility feels like.

To Harry’s great surprise, he heard a word he thought he would never hear from this Malfoy. “Sorry.” Trying not to appear surprised, Harry now looked over; Malfoy’s expression wasn’t exactly contrite, but showed some understanding of Harry’s feelings.

“I know you’re trying not to react to my little comments, Potter,” Malfoy went on. “Guess that one just hit you the wrong way, and I can see why. At first, I had to stop myself from insulting you and your counterparts every single sentence, it was such a habit. But I suppose enough time has passed that I should be able to put a lid on it. Not fair for you to make Weasley do all the work.”

Harry grunted. “He’ll appreciate that. Especially now.”

“He and I have something in common now, that’s for sure,” agreed Malfoy. “Anyway, I shouldn’t have suggested that you were scared. Obviously, I know better. I suppose I was just curious why you fainted so much back then.”

Especially in view of Malfoy’s apology, he supposed he should indulge his curiosity. “When they got near me, I saw my parents being killed.”

Malfoy let out a low whistle. “I’m surprised you’d have any memories at all from that age.”

“I’d never remembered it at all, before then. It must have been buried deep. Anyway, I assume I was fainting because the memory was... unusually traumatic. That was why I went out of my way to learn the Patronus that year.”

“I guess you had more than enough motivation,” agreed Malfoy. “Is that why you tried so hard to find a spell to kill them, after you got rid of the Dark Lord?”

“No. It was because Kingsley—my Kingsley, the Minister—wouldn’t let the dementors back into Azkaban—”

“Why? Because they allied themselves with the Dark Lord?”

“No. Because even real criminals don’t deserve the suffering they inflict.”

Malfoy grunted. “You would take an ethical view of it.”

Harry looked over. "Have you ever been within a meter of one of them?"

"No."

"Well, if you had... you might take an ethical view of it too."

Malfoy decided not to respond. "Anyway..."

"Anyway, they responded by terrorizing the population, doing some organized attacks. There was no way to stop them, and Kingsley was coming under lots of pressure. What motivated me to look for the spell was the knowledge that Kingsley would eventually lose his position, and a Minister would be put in who would make the same deal as they had before. It was just this... blight on our society that I felt like I had to do something about if I possibly could."

Malfoy shook his head in wonder. "Most people wouldn't actually do anything about it, you know. I guess that's why you're Auror Leader."

Harry was about to point out that it wasn't how he'd become Auror Leader, but then realized that wasn't what Malfoy had meant. "I guess so," he agreed. "Not that I wanted it, but I'm stuck with it, so I might as well do the best I can."

"How did you find the spell, anyway?"

Soon he was telling Malfoy about his time in Japan, to which Malfoy listened interestedly. Almost before Harry knew it, Kingsley was signaling that they were near their destination. Looking ahead, Harry couldn't see it, but he was sure that Kingsley's navigational information wasn't wrong. Then, just as he realized he was flying through a cloud, he came out of it, and saw the island.

There appeared to be nothing exceptional about it, but as he got closer, aided by the moonlight, he saw the one feature he had worried about: almost all of the coasts were rocky, often steep rocks. He had wanted them to be able to retreat into the water if they were in danger of being overcome—that was an important element of the safety of the plan—but that looked like it was going to be difficult.

Finally, as they got to within a hundred meters, he saw a tiny, three-meter-wide stretch of beach that was only a little rocky where the water met the land. It would definitely be passable if one looked where one was going, and the moonlight would serve them well.

Harry flew up alongside the Aurors and pointed. "That's the place."

"It would appear so," agreed Kingsley. "How close to that beach do you want the Portkey to be?"

"Close, but not in the way. I mean, not in the path of a retreat from the—"

"I got it," said Kingsley. "I'll double-check with you before I do it, but I know what you want. Let's head down."

They kept their eyes open for dementors as they descended, but nothing appeared. Harry could see the tower surrounding the prison, but no light of any kind emanated from the island. What a grim place, he thought.

They landed on gravelly sand, and Kingsley quickly moved to the spot on which he planned to set up the Portkey: close to the path to the beach, but not in the path of anyone retreating into the water. "Yeah, that's it. Thanks."

The Portkey was a three-meter length of chain. Kingsley threw it to the ground, pointed his wand at it, then picked it up. He disappeared, and the chain fell to the ground. Harry knew, of course, that the others would be waiting.

A few seconds later, Hermione came through, followed by Ron. Harry had debated waiting for everyone to come through before beginning the operation, but with the stretch of beach being so narrow, he had to reconsider how many people he wanted there. If thirty of them were overwhelmed, people would be tripping over each other as they retreated into the water.

Harry made a quick decision. "Tonks, go back. After Neville and Luna come through, no one else should come until we send word. Then you and Kingsley come back."

"Got it," she agreed, and picked up the Portkey and disappeared; a second later, Neville appeared, followed by Luna.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione. "Okay, now!"

They pointed their wands at the tower wall about thirty meters away. "Reducto!" they intoned as one; their spells came together, and when the spell hit the old wall, a ten-meter-wide section was totally obliterated in a fiery explosion. That'll get their attention, thought Harry.

His Auror-enhanced sight told him that the cells holding the Weasleys and the Malfoys were almost directly in front of them. He felt a sudden panic at the thought that the dementors would suddenly start sucking out prisoners' souls, but there was little they could do about that if it happened. They had to hope the dementors would turn their attention to the invaders.

"Okay, let's get set," Harry said to the others. He, Ron, Hermione, and Neville stood as they had before when ridding their own dimension of dementors, four hands touching in such a way that every person touched all three others.

Tonks and Kingsley returned. "What took you so long?" asked Harry, watching closely for dementors.

"People were complaining about not coming—"

"Draco!" shouted a female voice in the distance. That woman's got amazing eyesight, Harry couldn't help but think.

"Mother!" gasped Malfoy, and Harry could hear real emotion in his voice.

Malfoy dashed forward, running at full speed across the rocky sands and onto the firmer ground. "Malfoy, get back!" shouted Harry, in vain.

“Patronuses up,” he said to his comrades, then noticed that most already were doing so. Harry briefly thought about running forward, but the whole point of staying near the water was to have a place of retreat, to make sure they weren’t surrounded and overcome. If he and the others ran forward, it would jeopardize the mission and all their lives. They had to stay put.

Malfoy had almost reached the point where the wall used to be when he was suddenly intercepted by what looked like a few dozen dementors. Malfoy didn’t stop fast enough, and was already weak on his feet as he staggered back, trying to get away. More dementors came in from behind him, and suddenly, he was surrounded by as many as fifty dementors. He went down.

“Damn it,” said Harry. “The rest of you, keep your Patronuses here, cover us. You three, let’s go.”

Hermione’s otter, Ron’s terrier, and Neville’s bear joined Harry’s stag as they raced toward the prone Malfoy, lying on his back as his mother screamed in despair. “Capture, or push away?” asked Hermione.

“Capture,” responded Harry, knowing it was highly risky, but making the decision intuitively. The dementors hovered above Malfoy, perhaps sucking out his soul as they spoke, all fifty seeming to occupy the same space. Was it possible to kill more than one at a time?

The four Patronuses came in from four directions and surrounded the dementors. “No!!” screamed Narcissa, as Harry assumed by the terror in her voice that she could see her son’s soul being torn from his body. This had better work, he thought.

The familiar pyramid shape began to form; Ron, Neville, and Hermione’s Patronuses were the three sides, and Harry’s was the bottom. Dementors now tried to move, and Harry could hear a lot of groaning sounds as they pressed against the Patronuses, searching for an exit. Harry saw one slip through, and hoped it wasn’t the one that had Malfoy’s soul. He refocused his efforts on forming the pyramid, willing his Patronus to mesh with the other three.

Even from twenty meters away, the sounds he heard were loud, and he was sure he would never hear them again. Sounds between a groan and a whine emanated from the dementors, and they increased in pitch and frequency. The pyramid was under great stress, but seemed to be holding.

Harry heard many popping sounds; for a second, it sounded very much like when Muggles cooked popcorn, and many kernels were popping at once. Then there were many whooshing sounds, and a fair amount of what looked like ashes fell onto Malfoy. "Draco!" his mother screamed again. Other voices could be heard; clearly, many prisoners were awake and talking.

"Any others?" asked Harry.

"Except for the one that got away, no," said Kingsley. "But I'd be surprised if that was all of them."

"Me too," said Harry. "Okay, let's move forward, carefully. Tonks, go tell the others they can come now."

Ron spoke. "I'm going ahead, let my family out—"

"No!" barked Harry. "That's what got Malfoy almost killed! We don't let anyone out until the dementors are gone, or chased off. Some might try to escape from the island now that they know what we can do. Kingsley, check Malfoy, make sure he's okay."

Kingsley trotted out a little ahead of them and knelt at Malfoy's side. "He's alive," reported Kingsley, "but it's impossible to say for sure about his soul until he's conscious."

Tonks was back, and DA members started appearing and jogging up to where Harry and his party were. "Are there any more?" she asked.

"We don't know," replied Harry. "We're going to have to look around. I want you to talk to the DA people as they come in, make sure no one goes wandering off. We all stay in a group." Tonks turned and started

relaying the information to those already there, then moved to the Portkey to make sure newcomers got the word.

From the cells, more noise was coming; shouts, pleas and demands to be let out. Harry knew he had to say something. He turned to the cells. "Attention, everyone," he shouted, trying to be heard over the din. "We can't let anyone out until we know the dementors are gone. After we know that, anyone who's committed no actual crime will be released. And by that I mean, if you're in here because you've committed violence, if you've stolen, if you've harmed anyone, you won't be released. But if you've harmed no one, you'll be released. Now—"

He stopped speaking because the din not only didn't settle down, it increased noticeably. More people were shouting more loudly; Harry heard things like 'I didn't do anything' and 'they made me do it.' He turned to Ron and Hermione. "Well, that was a mistake," he said wryly.

Ron shrugged. "If you'd been in there for any length of time, you might be shouting too."

"I guess," Harry admitted. He turned to address the DA members who'd gone on the mission, all of whom were now on the island. "For the time being, keep your Patronuses close to you. If we push them away, they might leave the island, and we want to—"

In his mind, he heard Luna cry, 'help.' Alarmed, quickly putting a hand up to forestall any questions, he looked upwards to get her view. He could tell that she was running; she turned to look, and over a dozen dementors were following her. How had she gotten away from the group? He knew that she was outside the tower, but on which side?

He looked at Ron, Hermione, and Neville as he took out his broom. "Watch me. When I point, Apparate to where I'm pointing."

Not waiting for their acknowledgment, he kicked off and flew upward. Heart pounding, he had to fly straight up to be able to see all sides of the tower from above. Finally, he saw it: she was already being surrounded by a group of dementors. He saw her fall, and pointed to

a spot about ten meters away. He saw them Apparate to the spot, and he did as well.

Desperately worried that they were too late, he linked up with the others, and their Patronuses moved quickly to the spot where the dementors hovered over Luna. "Capture," said Harry unnecessarily as they again formed a pyramid with their Patronuses. Have to make sure none escape, thought Harry.

The pyramid formed, but just as had happened last time, one dementor was able to escape through a crack before the pyramid sealed. Again there was the popping noise, though with fewer pops this time. The lone dementor that had escaped was drifting out to sea, over the rocks.

Harry didn't run to Luna to check her condition; he focused on the dementor that had escaped. Pointing at it, he said, "We can't let it get away, it may have Luna." He looked at Ron. "We mount up and go after it." Turning to Neville and Hermione, he said, "Get brooms from Kingsley and Tonks, and join us. We'll try to use our Patronuses to push it back to the island."

Harry and Ron took off, and it didn't take long to catch up to the lone dementor, now thirty meters off the coast. Thank God they're not that fast, he thought. As they caught up to it, he saw Neville and Hermione approaching. "Bubble-head Charms, in case we fall," he shouted.

Their Patronuses approached the dementor; it tried to escape, but the Patronuses were faster. They boxed it in.

"Look!" shouted Hermione.

Keeping one eye on their quarry, Harry glanced around to see what looked like two dozen dementors converging on their position; they approached mostly from the sides and from above. He knew that tactical common sense demanded that they regroup, maybe try to herd the dementors back toward the island where the DA members could help box them in.

But he knew that he couldn't do it. He realized that the dementor that had escaped the pyramid the first time must have been the one that had sucked Malfoy's soul; it must be that it gave a dementor extra strength, enough to escape what other dementors couldn't. The one they had now must have sucked Luna's soul, but if they regrouped, it would become lost among two dozen others, and could easily escape, never to be found again. He couldn't allow it.

"Get closer in!" he shouted. He and the others moved closer to the trapped dementor as the others closed in; he could already feel the cold and terror they brought. They moved ever closer to the trapped one.

Suddenly, one side of the pyramid slipped; Harry saw Neville lurch on his broom, nearly falling off, unused to using a broom at the same time as using his Patronus in a way that demanded concentration. Righting himself, he moved still closer, as the Patronuses recaptured the dementor inside the pyramid. The approaching dementors were uncomfortably close...

Within a few seconds, they heard one popping sound. "Down!" he shouted, barely holding onto his broom, knowing that the dementors were so close that a few more seconds would have doomed them. They flew straight down; he came out of the dive so close to the water that as he straightened out, he realized that one of his shoes was soaked. He looked around; thankfully, his three friends were still with him. As they headed back to where Luna had fallen, he realized that she was looking through his eyes. He increased the broom's speed, and in under a minute was at her side, the others close behind.

He sat next to her and pulled her into a sitting position. "Are you okay?"

Shaken, she slowly nodded. "I will be. But that was... an experience I really hope never to repeat. It felt like I was dying... only worse. Really, I'd rather die than have that happen again."

He pulled her into a tight hug. He wanted to ask how she'd gotten herself into that situation in the first place, but he knew it could, and

should, wait. There would be plenty of time for that later on. They still had things to do.

He let go of her. Holding her arm, still sitting on the ground, he Apparated them to near where Malfoy had fallen. Malfoy was sitting as well, with Kingsley, Tonks, and a few DA members near him.

"I'm glad you got her," said Kingsley.

"What was she doing?" asked Malfoy, still shaken himself.

Harry suddenly realized why Luna had done what she did. "Saving your life."

* * * * *

Author's note: I'd like to let readers know that I have a blog, [sempriniblog\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://sempriniblog(dot)blogspot(dot)com), in which I write about various issues, issues of the type I like to explore in the stories, and the latest entry is about how I came to write these stories. The post also includes links to PDF versions of all five of my stories, including this one. (I will, of course, continue to post here until the end of the story.) Feel free to go to the site and download the stories, and look at the other posts while you're at it.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 15, Auror Leader: Preparing to announce himself as Auror Leader, Harry must navigate the waters of politics as well as try to maneuver Snape out as headmaster of Hogwarts.

From Chapter 15: "If the governors are unacceptable, given their complicity in allowing torture, then surely the headmaster is even more responsible. Are you planning on taking over as headmaster as well?" asked Snape sardonically.

Chapter 15

Auror Leader

It took over an hour to sort out the prisoners. Harry, Ron, and Kingsley visited each cell; Kingsley because he knew virtually all of the real criminals, and Ron because many of those held were innocent Muggle-borns whose counterparts Ron had talked to soon after Voldemort's defeat. In all, a hundred and twenty people would be released: about eighty Muggle-born wizards, and forty wizards arrested for various political reasons. Those who were left behind loudly protested their innocence, but all were questioned by Harry, whose ability to recognize lies left him amazed by the pure creativity exhibited by those who were desperate to leave the island, even with the dementors gone. Not all the dementors have gone, Harry reminded himself; a few dozen were out at sea, and could come back. He suspected they wouldn't, but in any case, there was little he could do. Flying over the sea to hunt them down was too risky.

He expected the Weasleys to immediately go to Grimmauld Place, but to Harry's surprise, led by Molly, they chose to go to the Muggle campground Hermione had chosen as a temporary place for them to recover from their experience, away from the eyes of the wizarding world. Assisted by Bill and Fleur, Molly and Arthur would take charge of organizing living arrangements, food, and so on. Dean, Justin, and Colin would later that day use Harry's money to buy from Muggle shops enough tents to house everybody.

Draco insisted on taking his parents back to the hideout and getting them past the Fidelius Charm; Harry decided that to object would cause a great risk of fracturing his relationship with Malfoy. He did stay close to Malfoy and his parents as they entered the cave. Hermione was with him, as was Luna; Ron was with his parents, helping deal with the Muggle-borns.

In the main entrance area, there were several pieces of conjured furniture; no doubt awaiting the result of the operation, Blackstone was sitting in one of the chairs. He stood when the group came in, but didn't speak.

To Harry's surprise, Lucius addressed Blackstone with the same respect that his son did. "Mr. Blackstone," he said, "it is a pleasure to see you again..." He trailed off as his voice choked up; it seemed for a moment as if he might cry. He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, I've... not yet recovered from my stay."

Blackstone took a few steps forward and extended his hand, which Malfoy shook. "I would be amazed if you had," said Blackstone gently. "I know the toll that place takes. It is very good to see you, Lucius. And how are you faring, Narcissa?"

She looked down. "I... will recover, I believe, thanks to my son and his... new friends." Harry exchanged a quick glance with Hermione; it was obviously going to take Narcissa a while to get used to the new state of things.

Blackstone nodded. "Clearly, it is helpful to be on friendly terms with the Auror Leader." He gave Harry a half-smile, letting him know that the comment, while true, was intended humorously. It was Blackstone's first attempt at humor that Harry could recall.

"Auror Leader?" repeated a baffled Lucius. "Who?"

"That would be the young Mr. Potter," responded Blackstone. Lucius turned to Harry in shock; Harry gestured to Draco, who preformed the Reveal Magic spell to show his father the symbol.

Draco spoke to his mother. "I may have been there, but it was Potter who found the spell that kills the dementors. Without that, we never could have gotten you."

A clearly humbled Narcissa turned to him. "We will be forever in your debt," she said softly. "And a wizard's debt is something we take seriously."

"Well," he admitted, "I hadn't known you were there. The main reason we went, I'm sure you know, was to get the Weasleys." He didn't want them feeling that they owed him anything.

“Your motivation does not matter,” she insisted. “We still owe you our lives.”

Harry suppressed a smile, recalling that in his dimension, he had resisted Narcissa’s attempts to extract favors from him because she’d had other motivations for saving his life. At least now I know she wasn’t lying, he thought wryly.

Malfoy looked at his parents, and from the uncharacteristically humble expression he saw, Harry knew what Malfoy was going to say. “Mother, Father... I want to apologize for getting you put in there—“

Both parents shook their heads. “You need not, Draco,” said his father. “No one but the Dark Lord is responsible for what happened to us. He knew we had not betrayed him, but he did not care.

“After the events of that day, I pleaded with him to be allowed to meet with you, talk to you. He insisted that I take an Unbreakable Vow that I would, upon meeting with you, capture you and turn you over to him. Your mother and I refused to do so, and tried to change his mind. After some period of... punishment, he sent us to Azkaban. I had been there before, of course, but it is different when you are sent there by an enemy, and when you are sent there by an ally. The first time, I could focus my feelings toward resentment of those who had put me there, and know efforts would be made to release me. My purpose was unchanged. But the second time, my wife with me, the framework around which I had built my life was in ruins. There was nothing to do but suffer, and wait for the end. I did not think I would get a second chance.”

He turned to Harry. “You have given me that chance.” Shaking his head in wonder at the notion, he went on, “I never would have imagined that I would say this, but I thank you for your actions. I will be your faithful servant.”

Taken aback, Harry shook his head. “I don’t want a servant, Mr. Malfoy. But I would like an ally.”

“Then you will have that.” Malfoy solemnly extended a hand, which Harry shook.

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Tell me, how would you feel about taking a public role in this fight?”

Draco turned on Harry angrily. “Potter! They’ve been out of there for what, an hour or so? Give them a chance to get over it! It’s hellish in there—“

“Draco,” interrupted Blackstone; Draco stopped talking immediately. “I do not think the Leader meant, this very minute. I believe I understand what Leader Potter is thinking.” Turning to Harry, he said, “I gather, then, that you are ready to take the public role of Auror Leader?”

Harry nodded. “How did you know that, sir?” asked Malfoy.

“The Leader would not ask Lucius to take a public role if the Leader himself were not ready to do so as well,” explained Blackstone. “I believe the Leader is thinking that when he announces himself in public as Auror Leader, if Lucius Malfoy is standing at his side, it would have a significant impact on opinion leaders within the Ministry. Is that right, Leader Potter?”

“Exactly, sir. But I just now had the idea, and the fact is, Draco is right. Mr. Malfoy should take some time to recover. I should announce myself soon, but it may be too soon for him to help.” To Lucius, he added, “You should probably take a few days or a week, think it over.”

Blackstone shook his head. “Leader Potter, your kindness is commendable, but your first impulse was correct. You need to think about the greater good, and here, the greater good is served by Lucius doing as you suggest. If he does not feel capable, then he will tell you, but you should at least ask it of him. You must get used to the fact that as Auror Leader, you may have to ask hard things of people.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He wondered if too much was being made of this right now; he had intended only to sound Lucius out on the

subject. "Well, I wasn't planning to do anything before the next switch, so we can both think about it."

"Actually, Leader Potter, I was planning to discuss that with you. I am given to understand that the next dimensional shift will occur shortly after one o'clock this afternoon. If a suitable opportunity can be found, I think it strongly advisable to do so before then."

Whatever the reason, Harry found he didn't like being rushed on so important a decision. "Why?"

"First of all, you have done something extremely disruptive to social norms; the dementors have been guarding Azkaban for over a century, and everyone is used to it. For this to be done by a party that does not identify itself will be unsettling to many; in fact, it is a great wrong that you have righted, but no one will be making this argument publicly. The Ministry and the Dark wizards who control it will demagogue this issue, presenting it as a threat to public safety. Those you have released will be described as hardened, violent criminals whose escape necessitates crude crackdowns and the revocation of citizens' rights. The sooner you announce yourself, the less time the Ministry has to paint your actions in this light. You can reassure the population that as Auror Leader, that you will be responsible for their security, since that is in fact your job. You do not want your opponents to have time to have an impact on public opinion. In addition, I can see no valid argument to delay this announcement. So, sooner is better."

There was silence as Harry absorbed this. As was usual when Blackstone spoke, Harry could find no flaw. Amazing, he thought. This guy is to power what Dumbledore was to magic. "You said, if an opportunity can be found. What kind of thing were you thinking about?"

"I am formulating a plan," said Blackstone. "Lucius, I believe you know Thicknesse personally. What kind of man is he?"

It was strange for Harry to spend so much time with a Lucius Malfoy who did not have the malice and arrogance of the one he used to know. This one twitched occasionally, held his wife's hand most of

the time, and looked uncertain. But as he prepared to talk about something he knew about, he seemed to regain some of his confidence.

“An unremarkable man. I have never known him in a position of power, but in power, I would imagine him to be a consensus-builder, one who would be careful to... I would say, look where he leaps, but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he would carefully map the area into which he will gently step. But power does odd things to people; even Fudge—an indecisive man if ever there was one—got used to it. To say more, I would need to know the current political situation.”

Blackstone took a few minutes to get Lucius up to date. When he finished, Harry had a question. “Mr. Malfoy, is Thicknesse someone who would naturally have allied with Dark wizards? I mean, I wouldn’t think so, or they wouldn’t have found it necessary to put him under the Imperius Curse. Right?”

“Yes and no,” replied Lucius. “I believe he was placed under the Curse because while he might not have resisted Dark control, he also would not have embraced it. He was a mainline Slytherin, and so not naturally inclined to join up. He might have done so out of fear, but he would not have been as aggressive as the Dark Lord would have wished.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Malfoy,” said Harry. “What do you mean, mainline?”

Draco answered before his father could. “It means, as opposed to Dark Slytherins, the type who would join the Dark Lord because they wanted to, not because it was a good idea for more power. Mainline Slytherins are the type who want power, but not by violence. Like Mr. Blackstone, for example, or like Zabini.”

“I see,” said Harry. Looking at his watch, he said, “Let’s see, it’s three o’clock now. Mr. Blackstone, what would you say about the idea that I be the person who wakes Thicknesse up this morning?”

Blackstone’s eyebrows went up, and he grinned a little. “I would say, Leader Potter, that it was the very plan that I have been considering.”

His tone made it clear that he was impressed and pleased that Harry had had the idea independently.

“Well, I must be learning, then,” said Harry wryly. “But how well will that work? I mean, a few weeks ago Malfoy, I mean, Draco, was telling me that the Ministry might hesitate to join me because while I can get rid of them, what’s-his-name can kill them. If he’s the careful type, won’t he really hesitate to ally himself with me?”

Harry expected Blackstone to answer, but Lucius did. “He will, indeed. He must be persuaded that it is in his self-interest to ally with you. The mark on your forehead will go far towards doing so, but there may be more you can do...”

* * * * *

After another hour’s discussion, the meeting broke up. Harry decided to go outside for a bit of predawn fresh air. He walked a dozen meters away and sat on the ground, resting against a tree that had become his favorite.

I wish I hadn’t had to become so involved in politics, he thought. It seems like once you get in, you can’t get out. Of course, on my own side—if we ever get back—I’m involved in politics too, it’s just more complex here because I’m not the Auror Leader, at least not yet, and Voldemort isn’t dead yet.

And here I’ve gone and told Ron and Hermione’s counterparts that I wanted their feedback on going public, and now I’ll have to tell them, oops, went and did it anyway. Not that it’s their decision, but still...

Now, what’s the point of getting involved in politics, anyway? To affect public opinion? Put Voldemort on the defensive? I know, I know, to right what’s happening to the Muggle-born. Like Ron said, it’s not all about Voldemort. But politics is so unpleasant. Makes me appreciate the DA more. Good people, trying to do what’s best for society, at risk to themselves. The way Blackstone talks about the Ministry people shows they’re mostly thinking about their own self-interest, their little power games. Guess that’s a Slytherin for you. But it’s so disgusting that once I take the Imperius Curse off of

Thicknesse, he may even be grateful, but he won't do the right thing just because it's right. Politicians...

Can I talk to you, said a voice in his head. Sure, he answered. He knew she would know where he was by being able to see through his eyes.

He saw her leave the cave and walk towards him; she sat on the ground across from him, less than a foot away. "I guess we have to talk," she said without preamble.

"Why?"

"Because of what I did at Azkaban. And because you didn't look happy to see me. Not that you have to, but you usually do."

He shrugged a little. "I've been very busy."

She looked disappointed. "Harry... that isn't a lie, but it's an evasion. I hope you won't do that with me. You can talk to me, you know that. And if what you need to say is that you're not happy with me, then you should say that."

He sighed; talking about his feelings had never been his strong point, but he knew he would have to. "That's not the way I would have said that. I guess I'd say that I'm... emotional about what happened. I'm thankful that you're still alive, and I was very scared when it happened. I assume that you were trying to track the one that got away the first time, with the idea that it had Malfoy's soul?"

"Not exactly," she said. "Partly. I hoped to lure it back, maybe along with some other ones. I thought I could run around, get their attention, get them to follow me, and lead them to you and the others."

Harry couldn't help but wince at the sheer riskiness and irresponsibility of what she had tried to do. "I just didn't want to say anything, because I know you got your soul taken out, and I'm sure it's terrible. I figured it would wait until we were back on the island, or later than that."

She met his eyes. "I understand that. But afterwards, when you looked at me, it was different. I want to be able to see what I usually see when I look in your eyes. So, even if it's difficult, I want to talk about it. I need your support, and if you have things you need to say and aren't saying, I can't get it."

"All right," he conceded. "The main thing I was thinking after that happened was that you probably shouldn't go on missions anymore."

She blinked in surprise. "Do you mean you think you can't trust me, even if I promised not to do anything like that again?"

"No, it's not that. If you said that, I would believe you. It's just that with you there, and in danger, it's hard for me to make decisions just as Auror Leader. Like, when we went out to sea to kill the one that had gotten your soul... I hadn't done this operation as a broom-based thing because of Neville and Hermione's lack of broom experience. I knew it was much more dangerous for them. But when the one that took your soul flew out into the sea, I didn't hesitate to order them to get brooms and join us. Neville almost fell off once, which lost us time, and we would've been overwhelmed in seconds by the ones closing in on us. But I'd already decided I wasn't moving until the one with your soul was dead.

"That wasn't the decision of an Auror Leader," he went on earnestly. "It was the decision of someone desperate to save the person he loves." She reached out and took his hand. "I risked their lives for that, and I'm not sure I'd have taken the same risks if it had been someone else's soul I was trying to save. I feel like it compromised my decision-making."

She thought for a few seconds, and responded. "Do you mean that you wouldn't have done the same thing if it had been Ron or Hermione's soul at stake?"

"Maybe," he admitted. "But I might not have if it had been Michael or Lee. And I get your point, but right now, Ron and Hermione are Aurors; you're not."

“Does that make a difference? I mean, if you would set aside your tactical judgment to save them, then they shouldn’t go on missions with you either, if that’s your reason for thinking I shouldn’t go.”

He was silent, thinking. She went on. “Honestly, I think you’re confusing your reasons and your emotions. The thing I did that was wrong, strictly speaking, was go after the dementors without your permission. But the thing that you’re upset about was that I almost got killed; I think you’d be a lot less bothered that I did something without permission if nothing had come of it. I hope you can separate those two things in your mind.”

He knew she was right, but he felt how he felt. “I understand, but it’s difficult. I’ll think about it. I just had this terror that I was going to lose you. I know your terror was worse, but still...”

“I’m not sure it was worse, bad as it was,” she said. “Fearing the death of the person you love is really bad, as my father can attest. And if we end up together, I’m probably going to experience that quite a lot. I wouldn’t blame you; you didn’t choose this, and there’s not much you can do about it. But if we stay together, we have to do more than see through each other’s eyes. We have to feel with each other’s hearts.”

Affected, he nodded. “I’ll try. I’ve just never been very good at expressing how I feel.”

She smiled. “I’ll try to help you.”

He smiled in return. “I’ll bet you will.”

They sat in silence for a minute, then the rustle of leaves indicated someone approaching; Harry looked up. “Hey, Malfoy.”

“Potter,” Malfoy replied in greeting. “Luna.”

“Pull up a chair,” said Harry humorously, gesturing to the ground. Malfoy rolled his eyes and sat.

“Didn’t want to interrupt you two.”

"It's okay. What is it?"

Uncomfortably, Malfoy said to Luna, "First, I wanted to thank you for what you did. I'm told that you chased after my soul even though it didn't occur to the Auror Leader here."

"You're very welcome. And as for the other thing, don't blame him. I am a Ravenclaw, after all."

Harry and Malfoy both chuckled. "I'll keep it in mind," said Malfoy. "And about you, Potter... by the way, did you know that Mr. Blackstone is telling me that I should, when talking to you, refer to you as 'Leader Potter'?"

Harry laughed out loud. "It wouldn't sound right."

Grinning, Malfoy responded, "That's almost exactly what I said. It's hard enough to keep the word 'idiot' out of every sentence."

"You don't have to stand on ceremony with me," joked Harry, knowing Malfoy was kidding.

"Well, anyway... I did want to say that I shouldn't have jumped on you for what you said about my father helping. Both he and Mr. Blackstone said later that we have to do what we have to do, even if it isn't very comfortable, and you've had to do much harder things than that."

Harry grunted. "That's the kind of thing I'd really rather not think about."

"I wasn't actually thinking about the Auror Leader test, but I guess that too," agreed Malfoy. "I'd guess that's pretty nasty."

"Not to whine, but 'traumatic' would be the word I'd use," said Harry. "If I had to pick between that and Azkaban for six months, I'd really have to think about it. They're both awful. I guess it'd be a matter of whether you want your pain in a concentrated burst, or spread out over time."

“But I wouldn’t worry about it, Malfoy. I know Blackstone and your father are right, but one reason I backed off was that I think you were right, too. I threw a fit right after the test, and basically ran away for a few months. Different situation, but I can see why you’d want him left alone. Believe me, I don’t want to use him unless I have to.”

“I know. But I have to admit, it was a good idea. I’m pretty sure my father always intimidated Thicknesse, so him and the Auror Leader telling him what to do will be a big push. Oh, that reminds me, there was something I wanted to ask you. After you announce, maybe in the next switch, I’d like you to help us get Malfoy Manor back. Since a Death Eater puppet won’t be controlling the Ministry anymore, we’ll have the law on our side again. We could do it without you, of course, but it would be long and tedious.”

“Hmmm... I’m inclined to do it, but I’d rather not give a firm answer until the next switch, and after talking to your father. There would be more risk than last time—not a lot, but some—since this time we wouldn’t have a pair of eyes already there. I just have to weigh the risk, make sure it’s okay. I assume you’d come with me.”

“Of course,” agreed Malfoy. “Okay, I’ll let you think about it. I’m going to go take a nap, all this switching really messes up my schedule.”

“Sorry,” said Harry facetiously as Malfoy got up. He spent another few minutes with Luna before going back into the cave.

* * * * *

Harry knew where to Apparate into the Ministry; Thicknesse’s sleeping location and the extent of his magical protection had been secret before Voldemort’s death, but after the Ministry in his own dimension was cleared of Dark influence, his Kingsley had known it well, and informed Harry a few switches ago in case he wanted to do what he was doing. Harry also knew there would be Auror guards, but he was surprised that they were two Aurors he’d interacted with in the Auror Leader test.

In a room that served as the last one an intruder would have to get past to get at the Minister, there was a large magical field, an X shape that went from corner to corner, the two lines meeting in the middle of the room, about two feet off the ground. Standing with their backs to the door were Melanie Frommant and Paul Hedghorn. He knew where the field would be, and Apparated in across the room from the two Aurors. He didn't use the Cloak.

Startled by the Apparition sound, both drew their wands. "Drop your wand!" shouted Frommant.

"My wand's not pointed at you, and it won't be unless you get hostile," replied Harry. "I need to talk to you for a minute."

"I don't care if you're really Harry Potter," said Hedghorn, voice raised to nearly a shout. "When an Auror tells you to drop your wand, you drop your wand!"

"And when the Auror Leader tells you he wants to talk to you, you talk to him," responded Harry.

"Hah!" responded Hedghorn derisively. "What drugs are you on, Potter?"

"Wish I was, Hedghorn. It's the sad truth. Check if you want."

Apparently surprised that Harry knew his name, Hedghorn exchanged a glance with Frommant. He took a few steps forward and pointed his wand at Harry's forehead, but instead of a Reveal spell, he sent a low-power Stunner.

His sense of knowing when about to be attacked having told him, Harry darted away while sending a Freezing spell at Hedghorn, who went motionless, then toppled over to one side. Frommant was still pointing her wand at Harry, but he could sense that she wasn't ready to attack yet.

Annoyed, he addressed Hedghorn's prone form, knowing he could be heard. "I said check, you idiot, not Stun! We're going to have to have a talk about this later. Not the way to get off on the right foot with the

new boss.” He turned to Frommant, who appeared to be contemplating the possibility that Harry was telling the truth. “How about you, Mel? Are you going to give me a chance?”

Neither checking nor attacking, she looked at him quizzically. “We’ve never met, but you really sound like you know me.”

“We met in the Auror Leader test,” he said somberly. “I liked you, you were very nice, and helpful.”

She gestured to her comrade on the floor. “How about him?”

“He spent all his time insulting people, trying to get a rise out of them.”

“Well, you really appear to know him,” she grinned. “All right, then.” She did the Reveal spell, and had the usual reaction. “I don’t believe it,” she whispered to herself.

He crossed the room to stand across from her, putting up a temporary shield to protect himself as he crossed the magical field in the middle of the room. “Well, it seems like you do. I know this is all very sudden, Mel, but I’m here for a reason. I need to see the Minister.”

“Why?”

“Well, first, to take the Imperius Curse off of him—“

“He’s not under the Curse! We’d know if he was!”

“Yeah, I heard Yaxley did a good job. But he is, I’ll be able to confirm it when I get in there. Anyway, first do that, then talk to him, and offer him the chance to ally himself with the new Auror Leader. It seems only polite,” he added with a light shrug.

She hesitated. “I really don’t know if I should let you in there.”

He knew he had to assert his authority. "Mel, I'm the Auror Leader. You don't have much choice. But if you want, I could overpower you," he joked.

She raised an eyebrow. "I don't think you could overpower me."

"Oh, I could. Why don't you ask Horny here."

She grinned. "I suppose it's the first time his nickname is appropriate, since he is completely stiff right now."

Harry chuckled. "That's the kind of joke he'd appreciate. That reminds me, did you hear the one about Fudge and Thicknesse?"

She winced, with humorous exaggeration. "Of course, everyone was telling it. It's disgusting."

"Yes, it is. But still kind of funny. So, you going to let me in?"

She thought it over for a few seconds, but he knew by her face that she would follow him. "Tell me, what happened to me, in the test?"

"You died in action. Very bravely."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Who killed me?"

Harry tried not to look at Hedghorn. "I don't know how accurate the test is when it picks a villain, so I shouldn't say."

She grunted. "Probably him," she said, glancing down at Hedghorn. Harry tried not to respond as she opened the door to the Minister's temporary quarters.

"You know he can hear you, right?"

"It's not the worst thing I've ever said about him, believe me." As they walked into what served as the living room, she lowered her voice. "I've read that Auror Leaders have special powers. Is that true?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

She gave him a small grin, understanding that he wasn't going to talk about it. "Will you be able to get rid of the Imperius Curse?"

"I'm pretty sure I can. I hope he's still asleep, it should make things easier."

Opening the bedroom door noiselessly with the aid of magic, Harry saw the man sleeping on the bed. He appeared to be in his late fifties, with black hair that was no doubt colored. He looked at the man's head, and saw the intricate magic that Yaxley had managed to perform in such a way that it did not easily dissipate. It took Harry only a minute to get rid of it; he reflected that it would have been much harder without the ability to see magic, and in any case, it was always easier to destroy than to create.

Harry motioned for Frommant to leave the room, and he did as well. When they were out, he knocked loudly. "Just a minute," he heard from inside; he imagined that Thicknesse was putting on a robe. No doubt believing the visitor was one of the two Aurors, he opened the door casually. His sleepy expression turned to shock when he saw Harry. "You're..."

"Harry Potter, yes. And you're no longer under the Imperius Curse."

Thicknesse seemed further shocked as it dawned on him. "Merlin... it's like waking from a dream, a terrible dream..." Eyes wide, he looked at Harry. "You did this?"

"I removed it, yes. I'm sorry, Minister, but there are some things I need to talk to you about. I know this is all very sudden. Can we sit down?"

Shaken, Thicknesse nodded, and they sat in chairs in the living room. "How did you get past my protection?"

"There's a story, but I'll tell you the important thing first. I'm now the Auror Leader, so they had no choice but to let me through."

They went through the familiar pattern: surprise, a check, an explanation. Harry went on to explain what had happened several hours earlier at Azkaban. "I'm going to announce that I'm Auror Leader very soon," he concluded. "By noon today, is the plan. It occurred to me that it would be a good thing if you were there with me."

Thicknesse shook his head, as if it was too much to process. "Mr. Potter, I have my own mind back for the first time in... I suppose it's been months. I'd like the opportunity to think about things before making such big decisions."

Harry had been prepared for that answer. "I see. Well, if you'll excuse me, sir, I think you need to hear from an associate of mine." He stood and Disapparated, then reappeared several seconds later holding the arm of Lucius Malfoy. Thicknesse recoiled slightly. "I believe you know Mr. Malfoy."

Lucius smiled; a polite smile that looked friendly but behind which a threat seemed to be lurking. Harry understood that Lucius was putting on his political face, and that face contained Lucius's understanding of political power: unnerve your adversaries. If they fear you, all the better. Harry was, he knew, using Lucius's reputation to his own benefit. Society's benefit, he corrected himself. "Minister," said Lucius.

"Lucius," replied Thicknesse, struggling to regain his equanimity. "You're with Potter?"

"I am pleased to assist Leader Potter as he begins to repair the damage that has been done to our society," responded Lucius. "We both hope that you will join us in this effort."

"I see... forgive me, but Lucius, were you not one of the ones who was assisting the Dark Lord in causing this damage?"

His expression not changing, Lucius nodded. "I have had a change of heart, shall we say. The best way to make up for my actions is to help clean up their consequences, and the best way to do that is to help the Leader. I would think this would be the case for you as well."

"I was under the Imperius Curse, Lucius," protested Thicknesse. "I did not have any choice."

"So, now that you are not, you will assist us?"

"As I was telling Mr. Potter, I have had the Imperius Curse lifted for the first time in months. I would like a chance to recover before making any important decisions."

Lucius's tone became harder. "I have spent the last several months in Azkaban, Minister, which I assure you makes the Imperius Curse look like heaven by comparison. I was only released hours ago. I have suffered much, but I am here, trying to help. Surely you can do the same."

"I will not be rushed, Lucius," insisted Thicknesse, with surprising backbone, considering that moments ago he had seemed afraid of Lucius. Harry wondered if that fear was lessened by the knowledge that Lucius was no longer working for Voldemort.

Harry decided to try again. "Minister, do you want to see the Dark Lord defeated?"

Thicknesse paused, which was all the answer Harry needed. "Yes, I do," he said. Harry could tell that it was the truth, but not the complete truth; a more honest answer would have been, 'Yes, as long as I come out of it all right.'

"But I don't yet know what is the best way to accomplish that," Thicknesse went on. "I really do not think it is asking too much to take some time to consider this question."

"Well, I'm announcing by noon," said Harry. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you any more time than that. If you haven't decided, I'll do it by myself. And... just in case this matters in your decision-making, there are currently some Death Eaters working in the Ministry. Six, I think it was. By noon today, they'll be gone."

Thicknesse's eyebrows went high. "Where will they have gone?"

“That, sir, is my responsibility,” replied Harry. “Minister, the Auror Leader is responsible for all matters relating to security and the Aurors. I’m answerable to no one, including the Minister. I’ll do what I think is best to protect society. In peaceful times, the Leader doesn’t take such an active public role, since it’s not so necessary. In dangerous times, his role is much more active, and his power is as well. This is one of the most dangerous times imaginable, and I’ll do anything I have to do to keep society safe. Those six are standing in the way of that, and so they’ll soon be gone. I’m sure you understand why it has to be that way.”

He had meant for the threat to be subtle, but he saw from Thicknesse’s eyes that it was clearly understood. Obviously unnerved, Thicknesse nevertheless asked, “Why don’t you make the Dark Lord gone in the same way you will these six?”

“Because I don’t know where he is,” replied Harry calmly. “If I did, I would.”

“It would be that easy?” asked Thicknesse doubtfully.

“No, not that easy,” admitted Harry. “But I’m sure you know the prophecy. I’m the one who can beat him, and I will.”

“I’m not sure I believe in prophecies,” countered Thicknesse. Harry’s sense told him it was a lie; Thicknesse apparently wanted to be reassured that he would end up on the winning side.

Lucius apparently understood this as well. “Minister, you should understand this clearly. The Auror Leader is not requesting that you ally with him. He is offering you the chance to ally with him. He will control the Aurors, and he will have the hearts of the people. You would do well to listen to him.”

“It would be better for me if you joined me,” added Harry, “because then the government would be working as one, in a positive direction. I don’t want to have to fight the Ministry at the same time I fight the Dark Lord. But I will if I have to, and if you’ve read history, Auror Leaders tend to come out on the winning end of things like this.

“Now, if you don’t join me today, it’s not the end of the world. Assuming you don’t oppose me, you can still join later, and it’ll be better than nothing. But—and I’m not a politician, and I don’t mean to tell you your business—the later you join, the more it looks like an act of political calculation. I wouldn’t want to go down in history as having put my political interests ahead of the safety of the people. But that’s just me. Anyway... if I don’t hear by eleven that you’ve scheduled a speech at noon, I’ll make my own arrangements. Good day, Minister.”

He gestured to Malfoy, who picked up the Portkey and disappeared; Harry deactivated and Summoned it as he strode out of the room, leaving behind a stunned Thicknesse.

Frommant and a recovered Hedghorn were in position on the other side of the door. He looked at both. “I’d like to get all the Aurors together, as soon as possible.”

* * * * *

One hour later, he was back at the cave, in the meeting room. “How’d it go?” asked Ron.

“They were pretty surprised,” replied Harry, “but they’re on board. A couple asked to duel with me, and I beat them. That helped convince people.”

“I’ll bet,” agreed Ron. “But I remember that on our side, some of the Aurors got corrupted by the Dark wizards. Has there been enough time for that to happen yet?”

“Our Kingsley said that a few had by this point, but not irretrievably. I did mention it. Basically I said that I knew some of that had happened, and if anyone had anything they wanted to confess, they should owl me and I’d meet them privately. If someone should have confessed and doesn’t, well, I’ll figure out what to do later on.”

“I assume you’ll fire them,” said Malfoy, as if it were obvious.

“Probably. They don’t know I have the benefit of knowing what had happened on the other side. Which reminds me, I have to make sure

that everyone who knows about the switching knows how top secret it is. Now that I'm going to be out as Auror Leader, that being known could really undermine my authority."

"I'm not so sure it would, actually," mused Kingsley. "Maybe a little, but you're still Harry Potter, and still the Auror Leader. Would it matter so much that it didn't happen in this dimension? It's hard to know for sure, since this is so unprecedented. But you passed, that's the point. One important thing is that if you're found out, if someone confronts you with it, don't lie or be evasive. Your answer should be along the lines of 'so what?'"

Harry nodded. "I understand. Anyway, I told them they're not to follow any instructions that the Head of the Auror Office tries to give them, or of course, anyone from the Ministry. And they're to take into custody anyone who they know or suspect has ties to Death Eaters, except for the six I'll be taking care of myself later.

"Now, the next mission is for me alone, but I'd like some advice before I go..."

* * * * *

This time, Harry entered Hogwarts through the main entrance of the castle, having Apparated onto the grounds. He was no more than a dozen strides into the castle when he heard a voice. "Potter!"

Filch was walking toward him from the side. Harry studiously ignored him and continued walking. "Potter, stop right there. You're not supposed to be here."

Without breaking stride, Harry pointed his wand at Filch and, pointing at Filch's feet, used the spell Hermione had found a few months ago that slowed down the victim of the spell substantially. "Potter!" Filch sputtered helplessly as Harry walked ahead and turned a corner. Never quite realized how much I disliked him, thought Harry.

Approaching the gargoyles, Harry decided he wouldn't bother trying to guess the password; instead, he Apparated past them and

continued walking. Reaching the headmaster's office door, he decided to knock rather than just barge in.

The door opened, and he found Snape behind the headmaster's desk, with McGonagall sitting opposite him. McGonagall's eyes went wide, but Snape appeared unsurprised. "I am busy, Mr. Potter," said Snape, as though dealing with an unimportant annoyance. "You will have to come back later."

Harry chuckled as he entered the office. "Yeah, I don't think so." To McGonagall, he said, "Hello, Professor. It's good to see you."

"How did you get in here?" she asked in amazement.

"Mr. Potter," said Snape disdainfully, "has always excelled at getting into places he should not be. Since he apparently will not wait, Professor, would you excuse us?"

Looking at Snape, then Harry, then Snape again, she finally got up, and wordlessly left. Snape looked up at Harry expectantly. He didn't offer Harry a seat, and Harry didn't take one. "I see you took my advice about coming up with something creative," observed Snape dryly.

"Yeah. Well, it was partly your saying that that got me thinking along those lines. Anyway, I've also decided to take your advice, and come out as Auror Leader. I'll be announcing it around noon today."

Snape had no particular reaction. "And you are telling me this because..."

"I plan to announce that I'm putting Hogwarts under my protection."

At this, Snape raised an eyebrow. "The governors have lawful authority."

Harry grinned. "And here I thought you never had a sense of humor," he responded airily. "Talking about what's lawful when what's-his-name controlled the government is pretty humorous. As you know, as Auror Leader, I have a wide latitude when it comes to protecting

society. I'll say publicly—and it'll be true—that the governors failed in their responsibility when they installed a headmaster who condoned torture of students, and for the students' protection, it's necessary for me to ensure Hogwarts' security."

"If you are Auror Leader," responded Snape, "you need not take specific control over Hogwarts. Hogwarts can simply operate as it has before, with no outside interference."

"Well, normally, that would be true," agreed Harry. "But the problem is, there was torture—"

"You would do well," replied Snape with a mild sneer, "to refrain from harping on that one subject. It is not important in the scheme of things."

With a large effort, Harry bit back the replies that came to his mind, mostly variations on the notion that Snape would probably think torture more important if it were happening to him. It was important that the conversation not get sidetracked.

"Since there was torture," Harry continued, "and since I've already made a big deal out of it—which, as far as I'm concerned, was totally the right thing to do—the governors are ultimately responsible, so I can't very well just let them continue running things. I have to take responsibility for it myself."

"If the governors are unacceptable, given their complicity in allowing torture, then surely the headmaster is even more responsible. Are you planning on taking over as headmaster as well?" asked Snape sardonically.

Harry had thought this over back at the cave, and discussed it with the others, especially Blackstone. Ideally, he would prefer Snape gone, but he knew Snape had value in that he had Voldemort's confidence. If Harry tried to push Snape out, Snape's reaction would be unpredictable, and very possibly strongly affected by his personal issues with Harry, or rather, James Potter. Harry didn't want a repeat of what had happened last time. Snape might threaten to reveal that Harry wasn't from this dimension, or to withhold support from their

cause unless he approved of whatever action was taken regarding Hogwarts.

“No, I’m not,” Harry answered. “Here’s the bottom line for me: that Hogwarts goes back to being the kind of school it was before the Scrimgeour government fell. No torture, no Dark wizard teachers teaching that Muggles are vermin, that kind of thing. Now, there are any number of ways that that might happen, and a lot of factors involved. What’s best for the school, what’s best politically, what’s best in the fight against what’s-his-name.

“Those issues are very complex, and I’m not sure I’m the best person to work them through.” As he spoke, he took three small objects—no longer than a hairpin, and almost as thin—out of his pockets and tossed them onto the floor. They were mini-Portkeys, set to activate on impact with the ground. “So, I’ve decided to have a few associates do this instead of me.”

Snape had reached for his wand when he saw what Harry was doing, but his alarm turned to surprise when he saw the three men suddenly appear: Draco and Lucius Malfoy, and Blackstone. “Sorry for the unexpected intrusion,” Harry went on. “I would’ve asked, but you tend to reflexively say ‘no’ to anything I ask, and I really wanted them here.”

Snape looked at Harry as if the Portkeys had brought the wrong people, and Harry hadn’t recognized it. “You want these gentlemen to represent you,” he said, seemingly trying to keep his incredulity under control.

“That’s right. I’d like them to work out with you how things are going to go forward from here.” Harry started towards the door.

Apparently still startled, Snape looked at Harry, then back at the others. “Why? Why not do this yourself?” Snape’s tone was almost hostile.

“I think we both know the answer to that, Professor,” said Harry. “It’s better this way.” He turned and left.

* * * * *

"That was fast," commented Ron as Harry Apparated into the sleeping quarters the three shared in the cave, where Ron and Hermione were talking.

"Like I said, I didn't plan on staying long."

"Like you said? Harry, she and I weren't in that meeting for long, remember? It was just you, talking with the Aurors and the Slytherins. She and I have been working on what to do with the Ministry Death Eaters you're going to bring us."

"Yeah, I forgot, sorry."

"So, how'd it go?"

"As you said, I wasn't gone long, so I'll find out when the Malfoys and Blackstone get back. They came by Portkey, and they're going to negotiate with Snape on my behalf."

"Bet that surprised Snape," grinned Ron.

"You could say that," agreed Harry.

"Was that because it was mostly political matters," asked Hermione, "or because Snape can't deal with you without irrational anger?"

"Both, but mostly the second one. I mean, he was talking with McGonagall when I came in, and he tried to make me come back later. It was all I could do to pretend I wasn't annoyed. I came this close to telling him that I'd already made the appointment, and his secretary must have forgotten to tell him."

Hermione smiled a little. "Better that you didn't. So, I guess this means the Malfoys and Blackstone know what you want, and you'll go along with whatever they agree to?"

"As long as it's within the parameters I told them, yes. Just the way things used to be is fine. I told them I'd rather Snape was gone as

headmaster, but not to push too hard for that if they think it'll push Snape over the edge. I know that if I'd tried to push him out, he'd have made any kind of threat he could think of. I still have hope that his being a spy could be of use to us."

"Hasn't yet," muttered Ron.

"No, it hasn't," agreed Harry. "Of course, on our side he did the thing that helped me find the Gryffindor sword, but here that's not an issue, since we have the basilisk fangs. Who knows if he's going to be of any help in killing what's-his-name or not, but at least it's possible."

"Did you mean Snape shouldn't be headmaster," asked Hermione, "or that he shouldn't be at Hogwarts at all?"

"The ideal thing from my point of view is that he stays at Hogwarts, but isn't headmaster anymore. The problem is that from a public point of view, it makes sense that he be held responsible for the torture, but realistically, he couldn't do much about it. I'd rather he wasn't headmaster for appearances' sake, but if he resisted, he'd have a good argument. Mainly, I'd like him to explain to those three why he should stay as headmaster. He'd never be willing to explain it to me."

Ron sighed. "Amazing, that he can't even deal with you. But I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised, considering how he was with you when we were at Hogwarts. So, you're off to the Ministry now?"

Harry nodded. "Just have to take the Polyjuice Potion so I can walk around the Ministry inconspicuously. That'll be fun."

"Do you have to?" asked Ron. "Wouldn't the Cloak be enough?"

"It's too crowded," pointed out Hermione. "It'd be too easy for someone to bump into him. Be sure to talk to Luna before you go, of course," she added to Harry.

"Of course, I was just going to. She'll be watching the whole time, and Kingsley and Tonks will be here as well. But I'll be fine, I'm sure."

* * * * *

An hour later, his mission accomplished, he returned to the cave. Ron, Hermione, Dean, and Justin were taking care of the captives, getting ready to deposit them into the Muggle world. Harry spent about ten minutes in his room with Luna, after which Malfoy stuck his head in. "Potter, we're back."

Harry stood and followed him to the meeting room, where he found Lucius and Blackstone. "How'd it go?"

Blackstone shook his head in wonderment. "I have seen a lot, Leader Potter, but seldom have I seen such unreasoning hatred as I saw Professor Snape display toward you. It was quite remarkable."

"Well, I'm used to it," said Harry casually. "I guess it was a good idea for it to be you three instead of me. But I am a little surprised that he said something that made it so clear."

"Oh, he did not," replied Blackstone. "You see, my ability registers power, but I have learned to recognize other emotions by their power signature. Love, for example, has a distinct signature. It causes more vulnerability in one sense, but more confidence in another. Hatred has its own unique signature, and I saw it strongly every time your name was mentioned. I coped with this by making a few mildly derogatory references to you—nothing too obvious, of course—so he would feel that I had a low estimation of your abilities but was forced to deal with you out of necessity."

Harry nodded. "So he'd be more favorably inclined toward you, and be more agreeable to a deal."

"Yes, exactly," said Blackstone. "Even so, he insisted that some details of our conversation remain confidential; it was clear that this was only in order to keep them from you. What was decided was that he would agree to step down as headmaster."

Harry's eyebrows went high. "How did you persuade him of that?"

"I pointed out, with Lucius's support, that the Dark Lord would find it peculiar if Snape were to remain headmaster after your having taken

over the school. I also let it be known that you were not insisting on his removal, that his remaining headmaster was an option. I am certain that had you not allowed that option, he would have insisted on staying. My senses told me clearly that anything you demanded, he would adamantly refuse. It was wise of you to have us negotiate in your place. In addition, he demanded that your firing of him not be in person, and that you not mention his name or blame him in your speech later for the torture that occurred at Hogwarts. I told him that we would persuade you to do as he wished.” Shaking his head slightly in wonder, he added, “I sensed that he would have preferred that I demand it of you rather than persuade you, but he declined to say such a thing.”

“Well, the result is the important thing,” said Harry. “Thank you all for your help. Now, any advice about the speech?”

Blackstone shook his head. “I do not think we could have any positive recommendations in this area. Your job will be to rally the people, to convince them of the rightness of your cause, and that your cause is their cause. Though actually, as a practical matter, I would recommend you not emphasizing too strongly the plight of the Muggle-born. As we have seen recently, many were willing to look the other way as they were persecuted. What you are doing will bring some danger to the population, and it would be better if they did not think that their danger was brought on solely to protect the Muggle-born. I can see that you do not like this, but it would be prudent, and probably beneficial to our cause.”

“Well, I don’t know,” responded Harry. “On our side, Ron did say that a lot of the Muggle-borns were told by wizarding friends that they felt bad, and ashamed, of what happened to them. Isn’t it possible that most people—I mean, those who aren’t actively prejudiced against Muggle-borns—will be happy to support the fact that this helps them?”

“Maybe during the speech,” said Malfoy doubtfully, “but afterwards, if there’s a body count, it’ll seem like too high a price to pay.”

“Won’t opposing him, period, have seemed like too high a price to pay if there starts to be a body count?” countered Harry.

Malfoy shrugged. "For some people, yes," he admitted. "All I'm saying is that Mr. Blackstone's point is that you get some short-term benefit at a possibly higher long-term cost. You may not be able to keep the population as united if this was a big part of the rationale."

He means, the mainline Slytherins won't be with me, thought Harry. I wonder if I was going to have them anyway, since all they want is to end up on the right side. "Well, I'll think about it," he said.

He turned to leave, but Lucius stopped him. "One more thing, Leader Potter."

Lucius explained what he had in mind as Harry's eyes went wide. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" he exclaimed. "You're already in huge danger as it is!"

A corner of Lucius's mouth turned up. "You, my son, and I have one thing in common; there is little we could do to increase the Dark Lord's desire to see us dead, so high is that desire now. I do not see that I have a great deal to lose."

"But... shouldn't you rest, after what you've been through?"

"I rested far too much in Azkaban. When talking to Thicknesse and Snape, I realized... it feels good to act, to do something. I will rest later, I assure you."

Harry looked at Blackstone; even though the man had no eyes, he had spent enough time around Blackstone to understand his muted facial expressions. This one seemed to be saying that Harry was worrying too much. "Okay," he said. "I'm going to go talk to Ron and Hermione about what I'm going to say."

* * * * *

At a quarter after eleven, Kingsley told Harry that word had come from high in the Ministry that there was to be a major speech in the large open area of Diagon Alley at noon. Wow, he decided to take my side after all, thought Harry. Didn't think he'd really do it.

At eleven-thirty he again asked Hermione what time the switch back was, and again was told it was one twenty-two. He resolved to look at his watch once in a while, and urged both Ron and Hermione to get him off the stage if for whatever reason he wasn't off it by one o'clock. He knew there was no way he could talk for that long, but still...

The time finally came, and at five minutes to twelve he, Luna, Ron, and Hermione Apparated to the third floor of a building whose window overlooked the open square; the room had been cleared by Aurors in preparation for their arrival. Nice to finally have the Aurors on my side, he thought.

The area was rapidly filling up, and he expected that it would continue to do so; he could see streams of people emerging from the public fireplaces, as well as many Apparating in. As twelve o'clock approached, Harry wondered why Thicknesse hadn't taken the stage.

Kingsley walked into the room. "One of Thicknesse's aides told me that the Minister was detained on important matters, and would likely appear at the rally late," he reported with a dour expression.

"What could have happened?" asked Hermione with mild anxiety.

"Nothing happened, Hermione," said Ron in annoyance, which Harry understood was not directed at Hermione. "That's Thicknesse's way of saying, 'I'll join you later if I judge that you have enough popular support to make it worth my while.'" He glanced at Kingsley for confirmation.

Kingsley nodded. "Took the words out of my mouth."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "I love politicians sooo much..."

Luna spoke. "I suspect he'll end up wishing that he'd joined you earlier rather than later."

Harry smiled. "Thank you for the support."

"You're welcome," she said. "Here's some more." She walked up to him and kissed him briefly but energetically. After it ended, he smiled at her again, then at the others, and Disapparated.

He was suddenly on the stage, at which a podium and a magical microphone had already been set up. A gasp worked its way through the crowd as people noticed and recognized him.

"Hello, everyone, thanks for coming out here today. I'm Harry Potter. As most of you know, I've been sought by the government for a while. I've more or less been in hiding, with my friends, doing what I can to fight the darkness that's been settling over our society. I'm sure most of you have noticed it. Many of us would rather not face it, as Minister Fudge did not at first want to face it when the darkness returned over two years ago. But the fact is that unless we want to lose our freedom, we have no choice but to deal with this.

"If you look to either side and the back of the crowd, you'll see some Aurors on duty. These Aurors have been under orders from the Ministry to apprehend me, as the Dark government claimed that I had committed crimes. They called me Undesirable No. 1. Well, from their point of view, I'm about to get a lot more undesirable. Kingsley?"

Kingsley Apparated to the stage a few feet away from Harry. "Kingsley Shacklebolt, an Auror, is going to do a Reveal Magic spell on me, and display the results, magnified, in the air above us." Kingsley did, and the resulting gasps dwarfed the original ones that had been heard when he was first seen on the stage.

"For those who don't know, that symbol is the symbol of the Auror Leader. I have taken, and passed, the test to be Auror Leader. The Auror Leader has total control over the Aurors and all matters related to public safety. I'm not authorized to tell you the details of this test, but I can say that you don't pass it unless you've shown that you're willing to lay down your life, and the lives of those closest to you, if necessary to protect society. So few people pass this test because, as you can imagine, it is excruciating. I've never been accused of being a coward, but to be honest, if I'd known what it involved, I'd have hesitated. After taking the test, I had to take some time to recover.

“The reason I tell you that is to assure you that I’ll do everything I can to fight the darkness that has come to our society. And the way to begin this fight is to say the name that we have become afraid to say. My fellow citizens, it was two and a half years ago that Voldemort”—there was another large gasp—“returned from near-death, and it was six months ago that Voldemort, through his agents, seized control of the Ministry of Magic, putting the Minister under the Imperius Curse.”

There were suddenly several Apparition sounds, and off to the left of the stage suddenly appeared five Snatchers, who appeared startled at the event they were witnessing. “The men who just appeared are known as Snatchers,” said Harry, keeping his eye on them, and his hand not far from his wand. “They are hired by those loyal to Voldemort, to apprehend and punish anyone who dares to say their leader’s name.” Turning to them, his voice taking on a light mocking tone, he asked, “Would you like to try to apprehend me? Frankly, I wouldn’t if I were you.”

They exchanged uncertain glances; finally, one shouted, “Get him!”

Several fired at Harry, who had already ordered the Aurors not to interfere if such a thing happened. He Disapparated out of the way, ending up behind them, and shot off two Freezing spells in quick succession. Darting away from the other three as they fired again, he fired a Stunner, followed by the spell he’d learned from Takenaka in Japan. He now blocked incoming spells as one stumbled from the Stunner, and the slower spell finally hit its mark, causing its victim to spin uncontrollably, fortuitously sending him sprawling into the man next to him; both hit the ground hard. The man who’d been on the receiving end of the Stunner, which he’d managed to only partly block, took a look at the current turn of events and promptly Disapparated. Harry quickly wrapped the two on the ground in ropes, then took the stage again.

“Now, as I was saying before I was rudely interrupted...”

He’d meant to get a small laugh, but following the laugh was applause, small at first but gradually increasing, finally reaching a high point at which it seemed that the entire crowd was applauding

and cheering loudly. He let it continue for a half a minute, then held up his hands with palms facing out. The applause slowly diminished.

“Thank you, but to be honest, those were not exactly the world’s greatest duelists they sent out for that,” he said dryly, to more laughter. “I think any Auror would be able to do that.

“As I was saying, the government we’ve been living under for the past six months has been controlled by Voldemort and those loyal to him. We’ve all seen the signs. The Daily Prophet has been turned into a hateful form of government propaganda, those of less than pure birth have been persecuted, over a hundred people guilty of no crime but opposing this government have been shipped off to Azkaban, dozens of innocent students at Hogwarts have been tortured, and the vile dementors enforce the will of those in power. This is not the wizarding society that I’ve lived in since I was eleven. This is not the wizarding society that I’m proud to be a member of. This is not the wizarding society that years ago so many, including my parents, fought and died to protect! And this is definitely not the wizarding society that will be here when Voldemort is finally disposed of once and for all!”

Excited cheers and applause spontaneously rang out from the still-increasing crowd. The last section of the speech was the one he’d written ahead of time, with help from Ron and Hermione.

Now that they were excited, it was the time to tell them about the hard part. “This must be done, but it will not be easy. You see, this time around, Voldemort has been operating differently than he did seventeen years ago when he was finally stopped not by a baby, but by the magical protection given to that baby by the love of a mother who died to protect him.

“At that time, he and his followers were killing freely, using the Dark Mark to sow fear and terror. This time, he operated differently. Since returning, he has been careful to keep a low profile, not drawing attention to himself. A year and a half ago, when Cornelius Fudge saw Voldemort with his own eyes, he told the rest of society, and Voldemort went deeper into hiding. He wanted people to forget what Fudge had said. Finally, he took over the government, but still drew no attention to himself. He would have slowly wrapped his tentacles

all around the Ministry, then eventually emerged, his grip on our society unshakable.

“So, we now have a choice. We can passively allow him to take control over our society because we don’t want to fight him. Or, we can fight, knowing it won’t be easy to defeat him. Once he discovers that his hold over the Ministry has gone, he’ll see no reason to remain in hiding. He’ll come out, and he won’t be subtle about it. He’ll kill, he’ll terrorize, he’ll leave the Dark Mark. Some people will lose loved ones, as I did. Some people will say, why didn’t Potter leave well enough alone? Nobody was dying before.

“Well, this is our choice. Peaceful and safe slavery, or a dangerous fight to restore freedom. But I really believe we will win in the end. Why do I think so? For a few reasons. One is that Auror Leaders have a history of bringing society together. If we look at history, no Auror Leader who faced a challenge to society’s safety has ever failed to lead them through it successfully. I don’t intend to be the first.” This drew strong applause.

“The second reason I’m sure we’ll succeed is this, a prophecy given eighteen years ago, a prophecy that the late Professor Dumbledore strongly believed was true.” He pointed his wand, and his memory of the prophecy appeared in the air for all to hear and see. He could tell by the reactions that people were impressed.

“The prophecy said that I would have ‘powers the Dark Lord knows not.’ What power is that? I can’t be sure. Perhaps the power to become Auror Leader, which stems from a willingness to make great sacrifices. Voldemort could never in a million years understand that, since to him, his own power is the beginning and the end of the meaning of life. He can never understand love, fellowship, sacrifice, friendship, the things that make life worth living. His is a barren existence, measured only by how much he can exert his will, how much he can make others suffer. We must do anything and everything to prevent that from becoming our reality. Now, before I continue, I would like to introduce someone who has lived in that reality, and has turned his back on it.”

Harry stepped away from the microphone, and Apparating into the spot in front of it was Lucius Malfoy; this also drew gasps from the crowd.

Malfoy spoke loudly and confidently. "My name is Lucius Malfoy, and until six months ago, I served the Dark Lord. At that time, my actions displeased him, and I was viciously tortured and placed into Azkaban. That was, in fact, no less than I deserved—not for betraying him, but for betraying you. I now want nothing more than to make restitution for those actions. Even if I die in the attempt to bring down the Dark Lord, it will have been worth the price.

"I can make no excuses for my actions. I fell in with the Dark Lord while still a schoolboy, attracted by his charisma and power. To be in his circle, one had to be willing to do anything he asked, no matter how black or evil, and there were many who were willing. I regret that I was one, and I urge all parents to do all they can to prevent such a thing from happening to their children. The Dark Arts can be seductive, their true cost hidden from view until one has traveled so far down the path that he cannot return.

"The time I spent in Azkaban broke me, and made me finally face the tragic toll of my life. Death there would have been most welcome. But less than twenty-four hours ago I, and others, were brought out of that terrible place by Leader Potter and his friends. I feel I have been given a second chance, and I wish for nothing more than to be of what service I can to the Auror Leader and to the cause for which he will lead us." Also drawing healthy applause, he stepped away from the microphone and gestured to Harry.

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. I welcome your efforts, and I have a message to all who currently serve Voldemort willingly. If you join me, if you join us, now, whether secretly or openly, you will be forgiven your past crimes. If you do not, you will go down with your master. And believe me, he will go down. If—" He had to pause again to wait out the applause. "If anyone who hears these words is now working for Voldemort but would like to join our cause secretly, send me an owl to let me know. If you want to end up on the right side of this fight, now is the time.

“Now, as Mr. Malfoy mentioned, he was in Azkaban until last night. A few hours before dawn this morning, I led a small force of my Hogwarts comrades and Aurors in an assault on the dementors of Azkaban. This was made possible by a spell I discovered, a spell that can kill dementors. We killed several dozen dementors, and a few dozen fled out to the ocean. Now that we know how to kill them—I will make the details of the spell public in the next few days—no longer will any member of our society involuntarily find himself in their presence.” This was met with scattered applause; Harry guessed that most of them were people who had been around dementors. Only they could truly understand how important that was.

“My friends and I surveyed the prisoners, and released those who committed no crime but opposition to the Dark government. I am certain—this is on my responsibility—that no one who had committed acts of violence was released. The dementors are not totally exterminated, but in the future Azkaban will become an ordinary prison, a place where people pay their debt to society but do not suffer needlessly. We hope for criminals to be rehabilitated, not mentally destroyed. As we have recently seen, dementors are natural allies of Dark forces, and have no place in our society.” There was little or no applause during the short pause as he transitioned between topics. He hadn’t expected any, of course.

“Another consequence of my assumption of the responsibility of Auror Leader is that Hogwarts will now become the school it used to be. I hereby declare that Hogwarts is under my protection. Torture will no longer occur there, and I urge parents to return their children there as soon as is practical. Their safety will be my responsibility, and that I take very seriously. The Hogwarts governors have failed in their responsibility by failing to prevent the widespread torture that occurred. Governors may protest that I have no authority to do such a thing. But the lawful authority of the Auror Leader is wide-ranging when it comes to public safety and security, so in fact, I had little choice but to do as I have done. Our children must be safe.

“As for the Ministry, I expect that they will return to the general policies that they followed in the months before Voldemort took control. The Ministry had been infiltrated to some extent by Dark wizards. This morning, Death Eaters working at the Ministry were

removed from their posts, and are now in my custody. Other longtime Ministry employees had worked enthusiastically with Dark wizards during the time of the Dark government. I expect that those employees will redirect their efforts towards the betterment of our society. Any Ministry employee who continues to assist the Dark wizards... well, let's just say that his or her career prospects will suddenly take a dramatic turn for the worse." There was a moderate current of laughter at this.

"Finally... I caution everyone that there are difficult times ahead. Not fighting was safer in the short term, but deadly in the long term. Fighting Voldemort and the Death Eaters will not be easy. Some people will die, in spite of my and the Aurors' best efforts to prevent it.

"There are some measures people can take to minimize any risks. If you think you may be a target of Death Eaters, do a Fidelius Charm on your home. Be sure you choose a Secret-Keeper who can be trusted; my parents died because my father chose unwisely. Stay in certain areas, such as Diagon Alley and the main road in Hogsmeade, that will be routinely patrolled by Aurors, and sometimes by me. Apparate from your home to your destination whenever possible. If not done already, get specialists to render your home immune to Apparition, except for one spot known only to you and those you trust. The Aurors will prepare a list of such measures, and it will be printed in the Daily Prophet in the next few days. I will see to it, by the way, that the Prophet strives to be a newspaper worthy of the name, that it will present the news fairly and impartially, no matter who is in power. It has been used as a vehicle for Ministry propaganda for too long, as I know from being attacked in its pages after I told people that Voldemort had come back. We need honest newspapers.

"Watch out for yourselves, watch out for each other. Be careful, but not paranoid. Don't act as if a Death Eater is behind every corner, but be aware of your surroundings and any possible danger. And most importantly, if you get information that could help locate any Death Eater or Voldemort, send it to me by owl. We need to help each other. The sooner Voldemort is dealt with, the sooner we can again have the kind of society we grew up in, that we can be comfortable in. But first, we have a job to do. Thank you for coming out today, and I'll be seeing you around."

Without waiting to see what kind of final reception he would get, he walked off the platform. There was strong applause, which grew when he waved from the ground next to the platform. While the applause was still going strong, he Disapparated.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 16, Three For Six: Harry's first successful operation as Auror Leader provokes a brutal response from Voldemort.

From Chapter 16: "Harry," said Kingsley, in a more businesslike tone. "I can guess what's going through your mind right now. But I have to remind you that you're the Auror Leader, and you need to be that right now. Take charge. Self-recriminations can wait for later."

Chapter 16

Three For Six

He went to Auror Headquarters, having already told the Aurors he wanted to meet everyone after the speech; he spend thirty minutes going over plans and giving assignments, including patrols of Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, and the advisories to citizens that he'd mentioned in his speech. He wanted to spend more time with them, but Kingsley discreetly reminded him when it was ten minutes until the switch, and he returned to the cave.

In the meeting room, Malfoy approached him, hand outstretched. "Good speech, Potter."

Harry tried not to react with surprise as he shook the proffered hand. "Thanks, Malfoy. You watched from that room we were in?" Answered with a nod, Harry continued, "Good. I assume you know you want to be careful about walking around in public, since you're still a high-level target."

"You're not my mother, Potter," Malfoy replied, with exaggerated disdain.

"Ah," Harry said humorously, "so your mother said the same thing?" Malfoy answered with an annoyed look that told Harry he was right. With a grin, he headed to the area where he slept; Ron and Hermione were waiting for him.

"Seven minutes to spare," said Hermione disapprovingly, with a glance at her watch.

"Plenty of time," he joked. Her expression didn't change. "Kingsley was there, he was making sure," he added.

"One of these days, you're going to be talking to someone, and you're just going to collapse," she admonished him. "Not to mention, you'll suddenly look substantially younger."

"Not substantially," he quibbled.

Ron looked at him sympathetically. "I think what you want to say here, mate, is 'you're right, I'll be more careful next time.'"

Harry nodded. "You're right, Ron. I'll be more careful next time."

"You mean, you'll be careful to say that to her."

"Yes, exactly."

Hermione sighed. "Why do I even bother," she wondered rhetorically.

Ron put an arm around her. "Because you can't help it," he said genially. "And I wouldn't have you any other way."

"Liar."

Harry chuckled. "So, what have you two been up to since the speech?"

Ron answered. "We wandered around the crowd as it was breaking up. Oh, did you hear that Thicknesse showed up, less than half a minute after you left?"

"No, I didn't. What happened?"

"I think he didn't expect you to Disapparate like you did. I saw him, and he looked surprised. He was heading over to where you were when you did that. I'd guess he was planning to ask you back up to the podium, since the crowd was still applauding after you left. I guess he'd determined to his satisfaction that it was safe to be seen with you."

Harry scoffed. "What a chicken. He saw how the crowd reacted, he could have joined me before the end. If he needs to see how they react at the end before he'll do anything, then screw him. He needs me a lot more than I need him."

"In what way?" asked Hermione.

Malfoy spoke; only now did Harry notice that he'd been near the room, listening. "The Aurors protecting him could suddenly be called away on urgent business."

Hermione's indignant gasp of "Malfoy!" came at exactly the same instant as Ron's "Good point." She looked at him accusingly.

"I thought of that, actually," agreed Harry. To her glare, he responded, "Not that I'd do it lightly. But if he tries to screw me, then sure, I'd consider it. Kingsley's told me that's hardly a new idea, and is part of the reason why the Minister doesn't mess with the Aurors."

She sighed. "I think you're becoming ethically compromised."

Malfoy sounded defensive. "Just because he doesn't agree with you—"

"Wait, wait, wait," he cut Malfoy off. He looked at her carefully. "Are you serious?"

Unhappily, she looked down. "Okay, maybe that's too strong," she admitted. "I just don't like it."

"Granger, he's Auror Leader. He has to become fluent in the language of power, or else he's no good to anyone. The ability to intimidate is an important part of that. He's not talking about killing anyone; the Minister isn't going to drop dead because he's left alone for a few hours. That would be about making a point. Potter simply has to let it be known that he's not to be messed with, or else he's not going to command respect. He listens to you, so the sooner you get that, the better."

She stared at him coldly, but Harry saw flashes of uncertainty in her eyes. It was clear that there were parts, at least, of Malfoy's argument that she felt she couldn't disagree with. "I don't think it's that bad, Malfoy. It's not like I follow everything she says, like a mindless zombie," said Harry, tweaking Malfoy for his earlier description of him and Ron. "It'll do me good to have her making that kind of argument. I'll be able to hear the other side of it pretty easily from Kingsley, or your counterpart, once we get back."

Malfoy looked curious. "Do you and I talk, on the other side?"

Harry nodded. "A little. We haven't spent as much time together as you and I have, of course, but he and I understand each other. Ethically, you're further along than him, because you did the right thing. He probably would have, but took too long, so he doesn't have the confidence of knowing he did the right thing."

Malfoy grunted. "He also didn't have to suffer the consequences of my actions."

It occurred to Harry that this was the strongest indication from Malfoy of the weight that his parents' incarceration had been on him. "True, but he and his family did suffer sometimes during that year, because in Voldemort's eyes, both he and his father had failed. It's less bad than Azkaban—"

"Lie down, Harry, it's almost time," Hermione instructed him.

He continued talking as he did so. "So while he didn't do the right thing, he also didn't do the wrong thing. If he'd killed Dumbledore, he'd probably be redeemed in Voldemort's eyes, and maybe his father too. So, his situation is kind of in between. Now, he's more like Zabini, not jumping into any camp. You just didn't have that luxury."

"Well, that's what Slytherins do, keep their options open," said Malfoy. "Remember, Granger, that's why he's got to use his muscle sometimes, like he did with the Minister this morning. Slytherins can smell someone who's irresolute a mile away

Harry's view was suddenly that of the ceiling of his tent; he was back, and Ron and Hermione were on the sofa. As Harry stood, Hermione rolled her eyes. "It'll be nice not to have to listen to him for a while, anyway. I really don't want to know what Slytherins can and can't smell."

Harry decided to refrain from pointing out that Malfoy had a point. "I can understand that. C'mon, let's go talk to the others."

* * * * *

They would have only nine hours on the island, and that number would of course steadily decrease over the following weeks. Six hours of that time went to sleep; the rest, talking to the others, especially Kingsley, and planning. Harry wished that the island time was during the middle of the night; he wanted to be on the other side during the day, where he could walk the streets and be seen. It wouldn't be difficult to persuade others, even Aurors, that he was conducting secret operations during the times he was back on the island, but he preferred not to have to deceive them. He asked Terry to compile a schedule for the next two weeks, and was pleased to discover that starting next week, most of the time on the other side would be during the day, a situation that wouldn't change until the island times became so small that they weren't consequential.

Which brought up another problem: it was easy to lose track of in the whirl of events, but there was still no solution to the problem of how they were going to stop the switching. What if no answer could be found? It wouldn't be so bad for Harry and his friends; they could settle in this dimension without great difficulty. George would even have Fred back. But their counterparts would return to an Auror-less country that expected Harry Potter to be Auror Leader. Currently, that Harry Potter couldn't even attain consciousness without great pain, and no solution had as yet presented itself. But it was hard to imagine what could change the road they were on.

Even so, if one set that aside, things were looking much better. He would have control of forty Aurors, and he would have most of society on his side. People would be on the lookout for Dark wizards, and Harry had already personally taken out at least ten Death Eaters. Defeating Voldemort would of course not be easy, but things definitely looked better than they had a month ago.

After the switch, Harry spent most of the night checking on things he'd been too busy to think about the last time. He visited with the Weasleys, who were still working with the Muggle-born political prisoners, who would gradually be moved to the wizarding world with recommendations on getting psychological care to deal with the long-term effects of exposure to dementors.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and four DA members who were good on brooms took the Portkey to Azkaban, then spent an hour flying over the sea around the island to look for dementors. They found ten on the island when they arrived, and were able to kill them all; even four who tried to escape were killed over the sea. Harry decided to check every night for the next few days, to make sure the dementors didn't return.

Another predawn operation was to secure Malfoy Manor. Harry had actually hoped that some Dark wizards might try to hold onto it, as by taking them out, he would reduce Voldemort's numbers. But to his surprise and mild disappointment, the house was abandoned. Suspecting magical traps left behind, he went over the house thoroughly, taking over an hour to scan for anything with a magical trace. But except for previously existing magic, he found nothing.

On his arrival at the cave, he'd found over fifty letters that had arrived by owl since his speech, and a dozen more came during the night. He checked them all for magic, but none had any surprises. Reading them, he found most of them to be complimentary, but a dozen expressed concern about the casualties he had warned would be coming.

In the morning, he spent three hours walking around Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. He talked to people, tried to reassure them, and asked them to report to Aurors anything they saw that seemed suspicious. He talked to Aurors, getting updates on the social and political situation, and advice about what measures should be taken. To his distaste, he also had to talk to the Minister, to request the appointment of a new Head of the Auror Office, as the previous one had been appointed by those under Dark influence. Following Blackstone's advice, he couched it as a 'suggestion' so that Thicknesse would not think that Harry owed him a favor; it was more, Harry explained, that a Head in whom Harry had confidence would be better able to convey the Ministry's 'requests'. The clear implication was that if the current Head remained, he would be ignored. Harry gave Thicknesse a list of five names, any of whom would be acceptable.

He went to Hogwarts and talked to McGonagall, who told him that there was no small amount of uncertainty there. While Harry had essentially removed Snape as headmaster, he had been silent on who was to succeed him, and had taken that authority away from the governors. He suggested that it be decided on the basis of a majority vote of the professors, which while he did not say so explicitly, he and she both knew she would win. He was surprised to hear that most students had already returned to the school. He met with a few of his allies among the seventh-year students, and urged them to keep the Room of Requirement open, 'just in case,' as well as to provide a quick way to leave the school if necessary. Neville decided to leave Hogwarts, while Dean returned; it would be understood by all at Hogwarts that Seamus and Dean would be Harry's eyes and ears at Hogwarts.

Finally, Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved back into Grimmauld Place, aided by one of the many Secret-Keepers there now were for the old house. Harry asked Luna to stay there, but she decided that she should stay with her father. They returned to their home, which was now protected by a Fidelius Charm. It was no longer necessary to use the cave, but it would stay connected to the Room of Requirement by Portkey.

By the time the fifteen and a half hours of this switch was finished, Harry was comfortable that things were going roughly as they should. Society couldn't turn on a dime, but for one day, what had happened so far wasn't too bad.

* * * * *

Saturday, December 24th was a snowy day, raising the prospect of a white Christmas, which seemed to add to the holiday cheer. Harry and Melanie Frommant walked down the main street together in their Auror robes, looking around occasionally at the decorations and happy shoppers. Harry wasn't approached very often, not nearly as much as on his first few patrols as Auror Leader. People were getting used to having him around, which was definitely a good thing.

"Bought all your Christmas presents?" she asked teasingly.

He grinned. "I wasn't thinking about that so much when I was on the run, and now, I don't really want to go shopping. Wouldn't be hard, though, since everyone wants to give me something for free."

"I wouldn't mind having that problem," she joked.

He looked at her quizzically. "Nobody ever tried to give you stuff?"

She shrugged, with a quick glance showing she was surprised he'd taken what she'd said seriously. "Occasionally, small things, but most people know that you shouldn't give an Auror expensive things. Although once, a few months ago, a man at the Ministry tried to give me what was obviously an expensive necklace. I turned it down, which didn't seem to surprise him too much. Any other time, I would have thought it was a character test."

"I thought they didn't do character tests once you made Auror."

"They don't," she agreed. "I just mean that that's very much like the tests they do for trainees. This would be a bit simplistic, of course. When I did them, they were more clever about it."

"I was thinking about bringing back the character tests, even for veteran Aurors," he remarked, curious what her reaction would be.

She raised an eyebrow slightly. "Well, you shouldn't go around telling people, then, should you," she said wryly. "Not a bad idea, given what we've recently been through. I wasn't the only one offered something like that, and it wouldn't shock me if someone took it. The funny thing is, only an Auror Leader could do the tests on veterans. We'd scream bloody murder if the Ministry tried to make us do that, but a Leader has such moral credibility that there'd barely be a peep of protest. Especially you."

"Why especially me?"

"Because you're the Boy Who Lived. I haven't viewed your Auror Leader test memory yet, but a few people have, and talked about it," she said sympathetically. "It's well known by now that the test gave

you back your parents, only to take them away from you again. That must have been... exquisitely painful.”

Harry tried to mask his emotions, and was sure that he wasn’t entirely succeeding. “It wasn’t fun.”

“I see the Leader is given to enormous understatement,” she observed. “I was surprised when I found out we had a right to view it—I mean, it’s hugely personal—but it does make sense. The Auror I talked to, who saw it, she said, ‘If he tells me to take a stroll in quicksand, I’m doing it.’”

“Well, let’s hope that doesn’t become necessary,” he said. “So, what are you getting Paul for Christmas?”

She gave him a sad half-smile; in other circumstances, she no doubt would have teased him about his clumsy and overt attempt to change the subject, but at the same time, she obviously understood his wishes. “How do you know—oh, yes, the test. I forgot you got to know me a bit in there. What did we talk about in there, by the way?”

“Not much. You told me about Paul, and gave me some girlfriend advice. And you defended me when Hedghorn was giving me a hard time about some extremely complimentary articles Rita Skeeter was writing about me.”

She grunted and rolled her eyes. “That test is real, all right. Both about him, and Skeeter. You going to give her that interview?”

A few days ago, he’d received the request by owl; he was putting off replying, but he knew she would only wait for so long. “I didn’t know that was common knowledge.”

“She’s talked to a few of us, and mentioned that she’d asked you.”

“I assume you told her I’m a tiny bit busy?”

She grunted. “Like that would stop her. She’s the type that would ask a wizard who was losing a duel how he felt about the fact that his life would be over in a matter of seconds.” They walked on for a few

seconds in silence, then she gestured to a nearby shop. "You want to go into Zonko's?"

Deadpan, he shook his head. "Nah, they never have anything good."

She grinned. "I'd heard you didn't have much of a sense of humor."

"I'm trying to do better about that. No, I know you meant on business, but it doesn't seem like the kind of place Dark wizards would loiter." He paused. "Is it?"

"Probably not," she agreed. "Just a thought. How about the owl office?"

He nodded. "Sure."

A young couple gave them a nod in greeting as they passed at the entrance. "They probably think we're a mother and her son shopping," she joked.

"You don't have any kids, do you?" he asked as they entered the shop. A dozen people were looking at catalogs; more were looking at information posted on the walls. They kept their voices down so as not to attract any more attention than their robes already did.

"No, we don't."

"How old are you?"

Bemused, she raised an eyebrow. "Nobody ever told you you shouldn't ask a woman her age?"

He shrugged, surprised that she would object. "I am Auror Leader," he pointed out.

"And on behalf of middle-aged female Aurors, while we're willing to die on your command, telling you our age is another matter entirely."

He wasn't sure to what extent she was joking. "You aren't really middle-aged, are you?"

She sighed lightly, as if surrendering. "Depends on how you define it. I'm 39." His eyebrows went high in surprise, but he made no comment. She smiled. "Thank you, Harry. That expression was a very nice compliment."

Uncertain how to respond, he just shrugged. "I just don't see what the big deal is about age."

She smiled again, this time in what seemed to him a motherly way. "It'll be interesting to have such a young Leader," she remarked as she headed toward the room containing the owls. "A very good wizard, but still a lot to learn about life."

"It always smells like a pet shop in here," he commented.

"A hundred owls'll do that."

She opened the door to the larger room. As he walked through, he saw about ten people, some waiting in line to see the staff, others standing at stations equipped with forms and writing implements. Like a Muggle post office, he thought.

Suddenly, he registered something odd: at one of the stations for forms, there appeared to be a young couple, perhaps in their late twenties. But their form and appearance fluctuated. One minute they were that couple, but the next, they were two taller men wearing dark robes, the type Harry associated with Dark wizards. He thought he recognized one, but he wasn't sure. Fortunately, they weren't looking in his direction. Their appearance to Harry continued to shift between the two versions he'd seen.

He stopped and whispered to Mel as casually as he could manage. "That couple, pink blouse, green shirt. Anything strange about them?"

She looked in another direction, pretending to survey the owls. "No, why?"

Again making an effort to appear casual, he turned back toward the door and left the room, knowing she would follow. They stood near

the door. "Slide," he instructed, using the shorthand for the spell that would cause onlookers' glances to 'slide' off them, to pay them no particular attention unless one was making an active effort. They both cast the spell on themselves. She looked at him expectantly.

He described what he had seen. "I think I've just found another Auror Leader power," he speculated. "The ability to see through Polyjuice Potion."

"Who are they?"

"I'm not sure. I think one of them is Crabbe, the Death Eater. He was there the night Voldemort came back, but I didn't get an extremely good look, because of the hoods. If it's him, the other is Goyle."

She nodded. "Custody, or TT?"

Even though putting a Temporary Trace on them would be difficult, Harry didn't hesitate. "TT. Watch the door, I'll be right back."

He briskly headed for the restroom. Fortunately, it was unoccupied. He locked the door behind him and Disapparated to the bedroom at Grimmauld Place, threw his Auror robe on the bed, Summoned a Muggle cap, then reappeared in the restroom. He opened the door and walked out to meet Mel again.

"Not much of a disguise," she observed. "You're still Harry Potter."

He tilted his head down. "Yeah, but the robe is kind of a giveaway. I'll keep my head down or away from them. We were lucky they weren't looking last time. I'll do my best to be casual."

He walked back into the room, the Slide spell still on. He didn't look in the direction of his quarry, but became quite interested in something on the wall behind where they stood. Wand up his sleeve as far as possible while still using it, he shot the TT at one, then the other, relying on peripheral vision for his aim. Satisfied that he'd done it—there was a soft blue glow around both of them that he was sure only he could see—he left the room as inconspicuously as he'd entered it.

It only took him a few steps to reach her. "Lose the robe, and get backup. Two people out here, no robes. Everyone on duty should be ready for a raid. If we get that lucky," he added. She nodded and Disapparated.

A Temporary Trace only lasted three minutes at the most, and if the two didn't leave within that time, the spell would have to be updated. It was tricky to get close enough to do a spell on someone without their knowing once; doing it repeatedly took great skill and/or luck. Or, thought Harry, someone who can see spells, and so who can hit from a greater distance and be sure whether he's hit the target or not.

She was back in almost exactly a minute. "Done," she said, in her best professional manner. "Robert and Margaret are outside the building."

"Good." Harry positioned himself near a wall, looking at a catalog which rested on the counter against the wall; forms and pens were plentiful. From his position, he could glance through the door when it opened and closed, which it did with some regularity as people moved from one room to the other. "Isn't it kind of late to be doing Christmas ordering anyway?" he wondered absently, trying not to look at the door too often.

She was standing on his left, looking at the same catalog. "For some items, they'll do a 12-hour rush. Fifty percent extra." At his surprised glance, she shrugged. "A lot of people put things off till the last minute."

A minute later, he glanced at his watch. "Damn. Two and a half minutes. I have to do it again."

"If you can't, be sure to put up a field," she advised. He was about to ask when he realized she meant an anti-Disapparation field. He nodded as he walked through the door.

Fortunately, the two Death Eaters were now at the service window being helped, their backs to him, so this was much easier. He found an excuse to walk behind them, shot the spells, saw the blue glow, and returned to the outer room. It wouldn't be long now, he was sure.

A minute later, the two left, walking through the outer room and exiting the building. Harry and Mel left ten seconds later, wanting to avoid being on their heels, and knowing the other two Aurors would pick them up.

The two were walking down the street; nearby, he could see Spencer and Mulligan loitering unobtrusively. "I'm getting my Cloak," he said to Mel quietly. "I'll be right back."

Fifteen seconds later, he was back; Spencer and Mulligan were now with Mel. "They Disapparated," said Spencer. "A few seconds before you got back."

"Let's go," said Harry. All three Apparated to the magic detection center, which Kingsley was currently manning. "On the map," he said. Harry looked up at the wall; it provided the location of the person with the TT, represented by three maps: one of England, one of the city or village, and one of the one-block area around the subject. The third map indicated that the subjects were not in a building, which Harry and the others had expected might be the case. It was a standard precaution to Apparate a few times in case one was being followed, and Voldemort would likely insist that his followers take all precautions.

"You three, come in thirty meters away, out of sight. I'm going in under the Cloak, ten meters, low power." On the island, Kingsley had taught Harry and the others how to Apparate at low power; it made the Apparition sound much softer, but it increased the chance of Splinching. He didn't like it, but he knew he didn't have much time; they would likely wait for no more than thirty seconds before moving on to wherever they would go next. Whether that would be another intermediate stop, or the final one, they could not yet know. He threw the Cloak over himself as the others departed.

Concentrating on summoning the right intensity, he Disapparated. He was in fact about ten meters away, and the two showed no signs of having heard anything. The blue glows surrounding them were present, but fading. Relieved, he shot off another two TTs, his hand sticking out from the bottom of the Cloak. Seeing the glow become

stronger again, he walked away as briskly as he could under the Cloak. About ten seconds later, the two Disapparated again.

Back at headquarters, the map changed to a new location. "This time, they're inside," reported Kingsley. "A fairly small house; they appear to be in the living room. Outskirts of Hogsmeade."

Harry looked at Kingsley. "This is the one, right?" The tone made it more a statement than a question.

"That'd be my guess, yes," agreed Kingsley.

Harry moved his eyes up to get Luna's view. "Get Ron and Hermione," he instructed her. "Tell them to Apparate to the detection room."

She acknowledged his request, and in a very short time, both were standing near him. "This building," he said, pointing at the map. "This wall, here."

Kingsley raised his eyebrows. "We're not going in through the door?"

"What if the place is under the Fidelius Charm?" asked Ron.

Harry knew that the TT while in effect canceled the Fidelius Charm, but didn't want to waste the few seconds it would take to explain this to Ron. "I don't want to take a chance they have Portkeys set up," he explained. "Get ten people out there, lay down App fields," he instructed, using the shorthand for an anti-Disapparation field. "We'll take down that wall, then we go through."

Harry put an arm around Ron and Hermione's shoulders, and Apparated them both to where he wanted to go. Behind them, Aurors Apparated in, and Harry could see the fields go up. He nodded to his friends. "Now."

"Reducto," they chorused, and fired as one. The spells came together, and the impact on the wall was as instantaneous as it was dramatic. The wall blew apart, and the Aurors behind Harry and the others immediately began firing. Two inhabitants were on the floor,

apparently injured. A few people fired back, but they were overcome by greater numbers. No more than twenty seconds after the blast, all six inhabitants were unconscious or injured. The Aurors moved in to secure the building.

Kingsley, who had been inside, walked up to Harry, who was heading in. "Four of them are known Death Eaters, in addition to the two still under Polyjuice Potion." He gestured to the man and woman on the ground, one with blood on his arm from the explosion.

Harry walked closer and looked down. "It's Crabbe and Goyle," he said, now confident. To a surprised Ron, he added, "Their fathers, I mean."

Ron smiled. "Great."

Harry nodded to both of his friends. "Thanks for the help."

"Any time," said Hermione, and they both Disapparated.

Harry lingered at the scene to look around the damaged hideout. Aurors were going over the place, pointing their wands to check for anything with active magic, like a Portkey. Harry didn't need his wand, and checked for a few minutes but found nothing. He went back to headquarters.

He found himself being congratulated and complimented by a dozen Aurors. "Six DE's, not a bad day's work," said one.

"I'm sure their master will be worried about them," joked another.

"Is the interrogation underway yet?" asked Mel.

"I'm not sure," responded Harry. "Where would that be?"

"There's a special room, I'll show you," she said. She led him through a corridor to a room with no windows, a table, and a seat on either side. A few seconds later, Kingsley entered behind a Confunded Crabbe. Kingsley put him in the seat, and from Crabbe's motions, it was as if gravity was stronger there. Harry looked at Mel, who

explained. "That chair has stationary magic that doesn't allow movement."

"Ah."

Kingsley stood to one side and spoke to the prisoner, the Confundus spell having been removed. "So, Crabbe, it seems to me right now that a switch in your loyalties would be in your best interest. This may be the only chance you get."

The large man stared at Kingsley stonily. "I will never betray the Dark Lord. When he takes power, he will see to it that you and those like you are burned the rest of the way."

Puzzled, Harry looked at Mel, then at Kingsley, who raised an eyebrow in an expression that looked more amused than anything else. "It's a reference to my skin color," he explained, holding up an arm to illustrate. "You know, as if I've already been burned to some degree..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Very clever."

Kingsley eyed the prisoner again. "I don't know, I heard better ones at Hogwarts. In my first year," he said to Crabbe, as if to emphasize Crabbe's stupidity for not being able to think of a better insult. "Okay, well, there's always Veritaserum."

Crabbe laughed. "That will not work," he said confidently. "The Dark Lord has developed a potion that will make Veritaserum useless."

"Well," said Kingsley casually as he prepared the serum, "it's nice to know that he has such little faith in your abilities that he prepared for your capture. Let's see if this really works or not."

With a spell, he caused Crabbe's mouth to open, and remain open wide. Kingsley poured a small vial of Veritaserum onto Crabbe's tongue.

The effect was nearly instantaneous. The tongue lit up, and in two seconds was a bright orange, as Crabbe screamed in agony. A few

more seconds, and it reminded Harry of a hot piece of charcoal; some black and some orange. Kingsley Silenced Crabbe, who was still screaming. Very soon, the tongue was a limp, black shard, and it crumbled into dust, resting at the bottom of Crabbe's mouth. Sighing, Kingsley Stunned Crabbe to put him out of his immediate misery.

"Wow," said Harry, eyes still wide. "Nasty."

Mel shook her head. "I'm sure Voldemort thinks that was very clever."

"He's right, it does make Veritaserum useless," observed Kingsley dryly. "Gotta give him credit for that. Quite a piece of work, that man is."

"I guess we won't be trying that on the others, right?" asked Mel.

Kingsley gestured to Harry. "Your call."

Harry shrugged. "Ethics aside, it seems like it wouldn't do too much good, practically speaking. I don't like the idea that we'd be burning their tongues on the off-chance that he didn't do all of them."

"Just to be a devil's advocate," clarified Kingsley, "it wouldn't be us burning their tongues, it'd be Voldemort. If you or I take Veritaserum, it won't burn our tongue off. I'm sure you see my point."

Harry shook his head. "I do, but it seems like a technicality. We know what's going to happen; it feels like the same thing."

"I don't disagree," said Kingsley.

"No other way to make them talk?" asked Harry.

"Just good old-fashioned torture," said Kingsley.

Harry's eyebrows went high. "We don't actually do that, do we?"

"Generally, no." To Harry's surprised look, he added, "The thing to keep in mind is that generally, torture doesn't work. If we took Goyle and started in on him, he might resist at first, but people usually break

at some point. But what if he has no valuable information? It's reasonably likely that we already know most of what he could tell us. If we torture him on the chance that he has some big piece of information, like Voldemort's location, it increases the chance that he'll tell us some lie, just to make the torture stop. We get bad information. We waste time tracking it down, or worse yet, conduct an operation on the basis of bad information.

"Now, if," Kingsley continued, "if we know, 100%, that he has information that's critical for us to have, and it's something we have the power to check on and know we're not being lied to, then torture can work. Not will, but can. So, I guess the point of what I'm saying is that I can't say that torture has absolutely never been used by Aurors in the past hundred years. I actually can't say that it hasn't been used in the past twenty, but if it has, I'm not aware of it. Let's just say that I can conceive of circumstances where I would seriously consider it."

"Let's just hope it doesn't come to that," said Harry, knowing that he would have to be the one to make any such decision. "But we could threaten them... I mean, we could show them the memory of what happened to Crabbe, then tell them that we'll give them the Veritaserum if they don't talk. Right?"

Kingsley shook his head. "Not if you're not prepared to carry it out. Death Eaters are afraid of Voldemort, they know what happens to anyone who lets him down. If I were a Death Eater, I might let my tongue be burned off before doing something that would make me his enemy. So, if you do it and don't follow through, you're just letting them know that any threat you make shouldn't be taken seriously."

"If they're already in custody, does that really matter?" asked Mel.

"If you assume they're never going to escape, then you have a point," conceded Kingsley. "But then you've foreclosed the possibility of threatening them again."

Harry sighed. "Okay. I suppose we can be happy just that we got these six, and we probably wouldn't have gotten much from them anyway. I've heard that Voldemort doesn't even make his location

known to Death Eaters, I suppose in case something like this happens.”

“That’s a pretty good way to look at it,” agreed Kingsley. “Now, what do we tell the press?”

“Why do we need to tell them anything?” asked Harry.

“Knowing that we got half a dozen DE’s would be good for public morale,” pointed out Mel. “And it doesn’t tell You-Know—” She reacted to Harry’s sharp look. “Okay, okay, it’s just a habit. It doesn’t tell Voldemort anything he didn’t know, or wouldn’t have found out soon enough. I can’t think of any reason to keep this secret. And I hate to say it, because I know how you feel about it, but... this would be a very good time to do that interview that Skeeter’s been pestering you about. Just be sure to mention my name,” she joked.

He rolled his eyes. “How about, you do the interview, and don’t mention my name,” he retorted.

She gave him a sympathetic grin. “The burden of the Auror Leader. Having to deal with parasites like Skeeter.”

He turned to Kingsley. “I assume you think this is a good idea too.” To Kingsley’s nod, Harry continued, “How do I explain how I saw them? I’m not about to let everyone know that I can see through Polyjuice Potion.”

Kingsley’s casual tone suggested that it was an easy question. “‘For security reasons, I can’t provide any details of that operation.’ It’s a standard response to that kind of question; we’ve all used it on a number of occasions. Just keep in mind that she’s likely to ask you the same question in a number of ways, try to catch you off guard. Also, be sure to stipulate that the article will be reviewed by the Aurors to make sure security details don’t slip in. That’s standard for articles about anything that could be a security matter.”

Harry nodded, suppressing a smile. He would tell Skeeter to submit the article to Hermione for approval. That would let Skeeter know that

she was on a short leash. She may have told the truth about Dumbledore, but that didn't mean he had to like her.

* * * * *

Indeed, the headline on the Christmas morning Prophet blared out, "Potter's Christmas Present: Six Death Eaters Captured." No other news appeared on the front page: there was the Skeeter interview with him, a straight news article that was naturally light on specifics, and an article about the Death Eaters captured, including names, photos, and comments from those who knew them, many of the comments not for attribution.

He decided not to make the rounds that morning, worried that some people might try to use the day as an excuse to give him presents. Hermione approved, while Ron thought Harry was being silly. Harry decided not to bother explaining to Ron the discomfort involved in turning down gifts from well-meaning people.

In between errands at Auror Headquarters, Harry spent most of the day at the Burrow. In recognition of the special occasion, every single Weasley—even Charlie—was in attendance, as were Fleur, Hermione, and Neville. They all talked, listened to music, and drank hot chocolate and eggnog. Harry hadn't bought any gifts, but was given a few by Arthur and Molly. Ron couldn't resist joking that as Auror Leader, Harry naturally couldn't accept any gifts. Harry was somewhat annoyed at the joke—he thought he had a good reason for being reluctant—but managed to keep his reaction down to an eye-roll. Other than that, he enjoyed the time.

Luna would be having dinner with her father at their home, but she agreed to spend an hour with Harry at Grimmauld Place before their respective dinners. Harry relayed his annoyance with Ron as they sat on the living room sofa; she nodded thoughtfully. "It may have to do with the thing about money that you've said he has," she suggested. "Maybe for him, the fact that you'll be given gifts that he wouldn't is like you always having had more money than you knew what to do with, while he had too little."

Harry frowned. "I thought he'd gotten over that."

“Maybe he has, but I think some situations can bring that kind of thing up again. I’d just be patient, it’ll go away naturally.”

“I’ve already been pretty patient,” he grumbled. “Well, I shouldn’t spend all our time together complaining about this. I’m just happy to be with you.”

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “As am I, with you.”

He put an arm around her, and they moved closer. “At least one good thing about this is getting to spend Christmas with the people who are still here,” he remarked. “George gets to spend one more Christmas with Fred, and you have one more with your father. That’s something, anyway.”

She nodded silently, but a pall came over her face. Harry wasn’t sure how good he was at reading expressions, but this one was very atypical for her. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

She paused, and it occurred to him that one thing he could count on with her was that she would never give the automatic answer ‘nothing’ when something was obviously wrong. I should try not to do that, he thought. Of course, if I do, she’ll probably call me on it.

“You’re right, of course, but... I feel as though it’s wrong for me to contemplate the benefits of being here, since it’s because of me that we’re here in the first place.”

His face fell. “It wasn’t your fault—“

“Come on, Harry. Of course it was.”

“We don’t know that.”

“It’s the only explanation that makes any sense.” Seeing him about to object again, she raised her hand. “Harry, let’s not argue about this. I admit that we can’t know it for an absolute fact, but both my mind and my gut tells me that it’s the case. In my mind, it is my fault unless it’s proven otherwise.”

He shook his head. "I wish there was something I could say to change your mind."

Her smile was wistful. "I wish there was too, but the reason there isn't is that what I say makes sense. Ask Hermione. If you push her, she'll admit that it's what makes the most sense."

He decided not to tell her that he already had, and Hermione had given the answer she predicted. He was about to say that she couldn't have had any way to predict that her actions would cause the switching, then at the last second remembered that he had warned against anything that could affect space/time, of which going to another dimension was a perfect example. He pulled her into a hug, hoping that would be better than words.

"And I also feel bad that the other Luna won't get to spend this Christmas with her father, and it'll be the last one," she said as she held him. "I... I try not to talk about this, but since I am already... I think about this every day, Harry. I know I'm responsible for this, for everything that's happened. It weighs on me. I was so careless, I just did what I wanted to do..." She went silent, holding onto him more tightly.

"I understand," he said as he held her. "Sometimes I feel the same way."

She looked up at him in confusion. "Why would you feel like this?"

"I'm Auror Leader, and I brought us back in time, knowing there could be dangers. That gives me more than enough responsibility."

She sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Please, don't apologize. It's—well, I don't think of it as your fault."

"That's very sweet of you. But it was my idea, anyway."

He had to think for a minute before he understood what she meant. "It wasn't so much your idea, as you realized that it's what must have

happened. If you look at it that way, it's more like fate. It's as though we didn't have much choice. And also, keep in mind that we have to get back, or else your meeting with your father on the other side can't happen. So, it must be that we get back."

"Or, there'll be a catastrophic time paradox," she said glumly.

"That won't happen." Probably, he added to himself.

"Couldn't it be that the Luna you saw in that vision was the other one, and not me?"

He hadn't thought of that. "I guess it's not impossible, but for some reason I really don't—oh, the necklace! You were wearing that necklace in my vision. Well, a necklace, anyway. I didn't recognize it then, couldn't make out the shape. But your father said it suited you, and now, I understand that meant because your name is Luna, and the moon—"

The badge he wore on his uniform made a sharp, loud noise; it was the first time it had gone off since he'd started wearing it. Not now, he thought. "Yes?"

It was Kingsley's voice. "Harry. Code yellow, Diagon Alley, main square."

"What does 'code yellow' mean?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Harry realized he should have just gone rather than asking.

"I'll explain later. For now, just get here as fast as you can."

"Okay." He didn't stand up immediately. "I'm sorry—"

"Go," she urged him.

Her expression told him that she wasn't happy, but understood that this would happen sometimes. He'd wanted to do more to make her feel better, or less guilty, but duty called. He wondered how many dozens or hundreds of times something similar would happen in the future, then stood and Disapparated.

There was already a crowd, and Harry had to make his way through part of it to where he could see the Aurors were. Some people were looking up; he did as he moved, and saw the Dark Mark. Great, he thought. Somebody got killed. This had to happen sometime, I knew.

But nothing prepared him for what he saw once the crowd, recognizing him as he pressed through, parted enough to allow him to see what was the focus of attention. From a distance, there could be seen three bodies, so red it appeared that blood had been poured all over them. Two larger, one smaller, and as he got to within ten meters, he saw that the shape of one of the bodies looked disquietingly familiar. He broke into a jog, and it was only seconds until his surmise was confirmed. Carelessly piled together were the bodies of Vernon, Petunia, and Dudley.

Inside, he cringed. How did I not think of that, he asked, damning himself. I never gave them a thought since I got here. They were okay last time, maybe I thought unconsciously that they'd be okay this time. But this is my fault, and I can't do anything to make it right. I hope they didn't suffer, but knowing Voldemort, I wouldn't bet on that. He came to a halt, and looked down, away from the grisly scene.

"Who are they?" asked one of the dozen Aurors on the scene. Nobody answered.

Kingsley walked over to Harry. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Is there anything we can do about the crowd?" whispered Harry. He was very conscious of the gawking.

Nodding, Kingsley cast a spell. Harry saw no observable changes, but people started dispersing. "It's a temporary spell, and easily defeated by someone who wants to try, but it hides everything in the immediate area from observers for a few minutes. We may have to update it."

"Can't we get them out of here?"

“We have to do a crime scene analysis,” Kingsley pointed out. He pointed to a group of six Aurors standing together. “Interview the crowd, find witnesses. Get a few accounts for the Pensieve.” They nodded, walking away in different directions.

“Harry,” said Kingsley, in a more businesslike tone. “I can guess what’s going through your mind right now. But I have to remind you that you’re the Auror Leader, and you need to be that right now. Take charge. Self-recriminations can wait for later.”

He gave Kingsley an angry look, even though he knew Kingsley was right. The anger faded from his face. “What is there to do, that I personally need to do?”

“Like I said, take charge. You’re fairly new, so you may need to ask about certain details. Where we take the bodies, where the post-mortems are done, things like that. St. Mungo’s has a couple of pathologists, and an Auror usually supervises in cases like this. There’s a well-established procedure.”

“Okay,” said Harry, trying to put aside his feelings. “Take me through it, step by step.”

* * * * *

Chapter 17, Three A Day: Wizarding society starts to panic as Harry and the Aurors are unable to stop the escalating violence.

From Chapter 17: “It... it was You-Know-Who,” said the very frightened man. “It had to be. I didn’t get a good look at his face, he was wearing a hood, but what little I saw was... weird, creepy. It had to be him. He killed those three... then he turned and looked at me. I thought I was a goner. But he spoke... that voice, so high, so terrible... he said, I’ll be back for you. Don’t know why he didn’t kill me.”

Chapter 17

Three a Day

Harry was swimming in the Pacific Ocean, a few dozen meters from the beach. He looked up and saw the stars, but they didn't provide the peace and comfort they usually did. He'd tried to sleep, but not surprisingly, failed. Swimming was, at least, better than lying in bed, the visions going through his head. He could visualize how it had happened. He didn't want to, but found he didn't have any choice in the matter. His unconscious, it seemed, was determined to punish him for his sins in this way.

It was altogether too easy to visualize, because of one detail the other Kingsley had given him that he'd much rather not have known: traces of blood had been found in Vernon and Petunia's nasal passages... it was not their blood, but Dudley's. They had been alive, no doubt unable to move, while their son's blood spilled all over them...

Voldemort had known, of course, that this could be determined. It had to be why he did it that way: he wanted Harry to know in no uncertain terms that his victims had suffered horrible torment before they had died. Probably they were tortured too, thought Harry, but that doesn't leave the kind of physical evidence Voldemort wanted left behind. At least not the Cruciatus Curse, anyway. He'd also been given details of the way the victims had died, again in a way designed to maximize the pain and terror.

Similarly dark thought went through his mind until he swam close enough to the shore to see a figure sitting on the beach. At the distance he was, he couldn't make out the face, but the dark skin narrowed the choices, and the larger build provided the rest of the information. Guess I should listen to whatever he has to say, thought Harry resignedly.

He made his way to the shore, walking once he reached waist-high water. Wearing only a pair of dark blue shorts, Kingsley was sitting on the beach only a few feet from where the waves reached the sand. "Didn't know you took early swims," he remarked.

"That's because you usually don't," responded Kingsley. "I go to sleep early, and don't need that much sleep. I like a long swim before and during sunrise. I'm going to kind of miss this place. Can't do this in England, especially in the winter."

"Yeah," said Harry unenthusiastically. He sat next to Kingsley, sand sticking to his wet legs. He would have to go for a rinse afterwards. He assumed Kingsley had something to say, or else the older man would have already begun his swim.

"Did you hear that some of them got the group spell?"

At another time Harry would have been happy, but right then, it didn't seem to matter. "No." After a short pause, he added, "That's good." He wondered why no one had told him, then realized that it was likely that people wanted to leave him alone with his thoughts at a time like this.

After another minute, Kingsley spoke again. "He's trying to get inside your head."

Harry wasn't surprised that Kingsley had been told what happened. "He succeeded."

"Only for a while, I hope," responded Kingsley conversationally. He seemed to be going out of his way to avoid expressing sympathy, which Harry appreciated. He'd had more than enough already. Only then did it occur to Harry that Kingsley was demonstrating good empathy skills, as he'd thought about it enough to know that Harry wouldn't want sympathy.

"Is there some way to get him out of my head?"

"Just time, and an understanding of what he's doing. He could've killed anybody, and he will do that soon. I suspect he'll wait until the first of the year, just for neatness' sake. I'm sure he had their location before that, but just chose now for them because of your catching those six. He wanted to hit you with the biggest blunt object he could find. More will be coming, and you have to be prepared for that."

“You can’t let your emotions affect your actions, because that’s counterproductive. That’s what he hopes you’ll do. It’s not easy to keep those things separate, I know. But the more you can, the more effective you’ll be.”

As he stood, Kingsley gave Harry a brief pat on the shoulder, then headed into the water. Somehow, thought Harry, I thought he’d say more than that. But maybe that’s all there was to say.

In the week from Christmas to New Year’s Day, there were no attacks. Harry confirmed that all the homes of the DA members were protected by the Fidelius Charm, and personally visited two homes that weren’t, strongly urging their occupants to do so. He also let himself be interviewed for a front-page Prophet article for the purpose of urging every citizen to protect their home. He reviewed security procedures for well-traveled public areas in which Apparition was possible, such as most of Diagon Alley, and the Ministry Atrium.

On New Year’s Eve day, an editorial in the Prophet suggested that the heavy emphasis on precautions was bordering on paranoia, and made reference to the Dursleys’ deaths. Greatly annoyed at the implication that his actions were motivated by an irrational emotional state, he decided to seek out the editorial’s writer. Most editorial writers were anonymous, but with Blackstone’s help, Harry was able to track down the writer, asking a few blunt questions of the man’s colleagues.

Shocked by being found and confronted by the Auror Leader, the man—a fairly senior Ministry official whose friendship with the Prophet’s publisher gave him occasional license to air his opinions in the paper—quickly backed away from what he had written, admitting that the editorial was nothing but a battle tactic in a turf war with an opposing department head in a fight over Ministry resources. Disgusted, Harry struggled to take no stronger action than to inform the man that while he had no problem with legitimate differences of opinion, he was not about to let himself be used as a pawn for such petty reasons. He warned the man against doing anything similar in the future. Clearly intimidated, the man took pains to assure Harry that he had nothing to worry about. Probably true, thought Harry, as

he suspected that the publisher, not wanting Harry to be on his bad side, probably wouldn't allow the man to write in the Prophet's pages again.

On the morning of the first day of the new year, Harry found himself on edge, remembering Kingsley's prediction of attacks beginning on that day. All Aurors were on duty, with twice as many patrols as usual. In addition, Harry had several teams of DA members doing casual patrols, pretending to be shopping. They had communication devices, and could alert him at a moment's notice. The idea had actually been proposed by Neville, with the strong support of those doing the patrols. Harry had been uneasy, and only consented when they agreed to operate in groups of four, rather than the customary two with Aurors. He still worried—it would be difficult to deal him a greater blow than to kill four of his friends, especially as Ron and Hermione were part of one group—but as they were Auror trainees, he couldn't reasonably refuse their offer.

Harry had chosen Hedghorn as his patrol partner, and as they walked, he reminded himself that the Hedghorn that he'd seen in the Auror Leader test was not intended to be a realistic portrayal of the man, but was just filling a role. Probably, he added silently. He did wonder why the test didn't simply create a new person for the role, one who didn't exist in real life. No doubt he would never know, as most aspects of the origin and operation of the Auror Leader test were steeped in mystery.

After they'd made their way down the main street, they turned to the residences, and that was when things got creepy. He hadn't been to Hogsmeade for a few days, and as they walked down the street, one he'd walked down many times on patrol, it felt like a ghost town: not from an absence of people, but an absence of houses. One long block on which existed two dozen homes appeared utterly empty, save for a few lawns and garden sheds. It reminded Harry of the post-apocalyptic scenes that he'd seen on Muggle television.

"I gotta say, this is weird," muttered Hedghorn.

"No argument," agreed Harry, looking all around. They'd been on patrol for a half hour, but little conversation had been exchanged.

Hedghorn spoke again. "So, Potter..." Harry knew that Hedghorn knew that Harry was supposed to be called 'Leader Potter', but he wasn't about to make an issue of it. "I wanted to let you know that I've forgiven you for that thing you pulled when we first met."

Assuming this was an implicit apology, Harry tried not to grin. "I appreciate that."

Understanding that his apology had been accepted, Hedghorn nodded. "I'm glad you do. I mean, I did what you're supposed to do—get the upper hand, take control of the situation. Eighty years since there's been a Leader, I'd have believed you more if you'd told me you were the Easter Bunny."

"I'll try that sometime," deadpanned Harry. After a minute, he added, "Probably it was my age as much as anything else," he suggested. "If it had been someone older, you might have believed it, a little."

"Maybe, but I'd have done the same thing."

"And if he really turned out to be the Leader?"

"If he was any decent Leader, he'd be able to turn the tables on me. As we saw."

"You don't know that, do you? Is it some common idea that the Leader should be able to get the better of any other Auror? I mean, I thought it was just the moral aspect."

Hedghorn shrugged. "Some of this is ancient history, or close enough, since there hasn't been a Leader for so long. A few Aurors have been doing some research over the past few days. Garrett found something that said that the Leader would be 'more than the equal' of any Auror when it came to skills. And since you're only, what, fifteen, you wouldn't have had time to develop those skills. Not that you're unskilled—you taught the DA—but nobody your age could be the equal of an Auror. So we imagine there are some skills or abilities you've been given."

Harry had given Hedghorn a 'very funny' look after the word 'fifteen' was spoken, but hadn't interrupted. Now, he said, "I was going to protest that I was seventeen, but I realized that doesn't sound a whole lot more impressive."

Hedghorn chuckled. "That was the point of the joke, really. Anyway, nobody really expects you to tell us what these abilities are, though a lot of us are curious."

"I'm not saying I won't ever. I just want some time to think about it. I definitely don't want them to get out to the public."

"No, obviously you wouldn't," agreed Hedghorn. "But I generally think Aurors can be trusted. But speaking of which... you said last week that anyone who wanted to come clean about the last few months should talk to you. One of the guys in the Ministry who it's now understood was, let's say, working well with the Dark wizards... this guy had a meeting with me, found an excuse to tell me how I'd been ignored, not treated with enough respect by the Aurors, and so forth. Really polished the old apple. Of course I'm not so stupid that I didn't know what he was doing, and I had a reasonable suspicion on whose behalf he was doing it. But a week later he told me I was one of five Aurors getting a raise. I should've told him thanks but no thanks, but I didn't. My thinking was, let's just go along with this, see where it leads. But I soon found myself getting used to it. I didn't even think of myself as compromised, though now I understand I was. I guess they suck you in slowly. Anyway, that's as far as it got, but I wanted to let you know."

Harry had known from Kingsley that Hedghorn had been one of the Aurors who was corrupted in his native dimension; he had wondered whether he'd get a confession on this side. This Hedghorn was telling the truth. Can you punish a man, Harry wondered, for what he didn't do but you're sure he would've done if he'd had the chance? Should you? He'd already decided this, and it was fortunate that Hedghorn and the others hadn't had a chance to be completely corrupted. Not having taken too many steps down that road, it was quite likely that he would continue his career without moral incident... at least, unless another such temptation presented itself. And maybe even if it did, this would prove a cautionary tale.

"Thanks, I'm glad to know that," he said sincerely. After a few seconds, he said, "Let's knock on that door over there. The only house on the block not under the Fidelius Charm, it's kind of conspicuous."

Hedghorn looked doubtful. "Bet nothing'll come of it. But sure, okay."

They headed for the home. "Why do you think that?"

The Auror shrugged. "Some people are just contrary. There's no way this guy—and I'd bet serious Galleons it's a man, not a woman who answers the door—no way he doesn't know he's the only one on the block exposed. Probably takes a perverse pride in not doing what everyone else is, convinces himself the threat is overblown. He'll do things his own way, by Merlin, the rest of the world be damned. Believe me, there's always one."

Harry nodded. He didn't know if Hedghorn was right, but it made a certain amount of sense. He supposed there would just have to be some things one learned through experience.

Reaching the door, Harry knocked. Seconds passed with no answer; he knocked again. Hedghorn was looking at the door carefully, from bottom to top. The door looked solid and expensive, made of a dark and solid wood, with streaks of black all over. "What?" he asked Hedghorn.

"This door, it seems..." He pointed his wand at the house and muttered a spell. "One resident... ah, okay, I know who this is. Guy named Woodburn. The door is kind of a pun, though I think it was done by his father, long since gone." He motioned to the dark streaks. "Woodburn, get it?"

"Yeah, I do. But what's his thing?"

"Hermit. Family had money, enough anyway, and he never goes out. Gets everything delivered, doesn't mind paying extra. Uses people like Kitterman."

"If he never goes out, how do you know him?" wondered Harry.

"Reasonably well known among Aurors. Certain citizens typify one class of person, and Woodburn equals hermit. You'll learn them all. Stevenson the pompous gasbag, Whittington the obsessive collector, Delvin the nymphomaniac, Shelton the paranoid schizophrenic. You get the idea."

Harry glanced quizzically. "Were you kidding about the nymphomaniac?"

Hedghorn shook his head. "Nope. Wish I was. At 58, it's not pretty."

Harry tried not to grin. He stepped back and looked up at the second floor balcony, which was stacked with odd items and had no space to walk or sit. He raised his voice to near a shout. "My name is Harry Potter, and I'm the Auror Leader. Please open the door."

No response. "Told you," said Hedghorn casually.

"We're coming in," said Harry loudly. "We just want to talk."

This prompted a response, at almost deafening volume; the speaker had to be using a magical microphone, and the volume sounded as if it was all the way up. "No one comes into my house unless I say."

At the same volume as before, Harry responded. "Then please come down and open the door, sir. If you don't, we will come in. We don't have to come in, but we need to talk to you."

The man spoke through the microphone again, but the volume was lower this time. "A man's home is his castle."

"Generally, yes, sir. But your castle is in great danger, and as a matter of public safety, I must talk to you about it. If you don't open the door in the next minute, we're coming in."

Harry decided to give the man more than a minute. After a minute and a half, the door opened just a crack. A man's figure was behind it, but the figure was clearly a projection, the result of a spell similar to

the one Malfoy had used when meeting Blackstone. Harry decided he'd settle for that, as long as he could communicate with the man.

"Thank you, sir," he said, deciding to pretend that it was actually the man standing there. "The reason I'm here is that Voldemort has basically announced his intention to kill anyone he can find. If you look out your windows, you'll see that most houses in Hogsmeade are under the Fidelius Charm; yours is the only one on the block that isn't. That makes you highly vulnerable, and I strongly recommend that you protect yourself and your home with that spell."

The voice was raspy; Harry wondered how long it had been since the man had talked. "Who did you say is going to attack?"

"Voldemort, sir."

"Who's that?"

Harry exchanged a surprised glance with Hedghorn. "A very powerful Dark wizard. He's sometimes referred to as You-Know-Who."

"Never heard of him. And he'll have nothing against me, so I don't need to protect myself."

"He doesn't need to have anything against you to kill you. He kills for the sake of terror. Your house is standing out like a sore thumb."

"Do I have any legal obligation to do as you say?"

Hedghorn gave Harry the slightly raised eyebrow that said 'I knew this wasn't going to work.' "No, you don't."

"If I don't do as you say, are you going to disturb me again?"

Harry couldn't keep a sigh out of his voice. "No."

"Goodbye, then." The door closed.

As they walked down the path to the street, Hedghorn said, "Look at it this way. He couldn't do it anyway. Since he's a hermit, there's no one he'd trust enough to be his Secret-Keeper."

"Better to trust a stranger than to be dead," muttered Harry.

"For you and me, sure. But one thing you're going to learn is that some people operate by very different rules than most of us do. I believe that in his mind, what he's doing makes perfect sense. The important thing is, you've done all you can."

That's not going to make me feel better if he dies; Harry thought it but didn't say it, as he knew Hedghorn was right. You can't save somebody from himself. Pointing to a house in the distance, he said, "What about that one?"

Hedghorn shook his head. "That's abandoned, there's no—"

A sharp beeping sound emanated from his communications device, and from Hedghorn's as well. "Code Red! Diagon Alley, Quality Quidditch!"

The two men Disapparated, and Harry found himself standing in front of the shop in question. Followed by Hedghorn, he entered, and found three Aurors. Three bodies lay sprawled on the floor; the shopkeeper was shaken but not harmed. He was someone who Harry had talked to, both in this dimension and in the other. "Ray, what happened?"

"It... it was You-Know-Who," said the very frightened man. "It had to be. I didn't get a good look at his face, he was wearing a hood, but what little I saw was... weird, creepy. It had to be him. He killed those three... then he turned and looked at me. I thought I was a goner. But he spoke... that voice, so high, so terrible... he said, I'll be back for you. Don't know why he didn't kill me." He shuddered. "Not gonna hang around to find out, tell you that. I'm not working for the next little while. Not leaving my house."

The owner of the shop Apparated in, and one of the Aurors who'd responded first took him aside to inform him of what had happened.

The other, kneeling over one of the bodies, looked up at Harry. "Leader Potter, something here."

Lying on his back, the dead man's shirt seemed to be absorbing blood, but from the inside; there was clearly a wound to the chest despite there being no damage to the shirt. The Auror did a spell that made the shirt and undershirt temporarily transparent, and Harry gave a start. Carved in the chest, as if with a knife, were the words, 'three a day.' Harry winced. The gauntlet had been thrown down.

* * * * *

3 DEAD AGAIN, AT HANDS OF YOU-KNOW-WHO

"Doing Everything We Can," Says Auror Leader Potter

By Dirk Willgert, Jan. 3

For the second day in a row, three wizards were killed yesterday in a style that leaves no doubt to Aurors that the murders were committed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. As we reported yesterday, the evil Dark wizard also killed three on the first day of the new year, leaving on one of the bodies a grisly inscription promising three new victims every day. Yesterday's events appear to be a dark confirmation of his intentions.

The victims were all members of one family: David Oliver (47), his wife June (45), and his mother Betty (71). The three had been shopping in Diagon Alley, and were killed within minutes of returning home. Sure to cause great disquiet in the wizarding world is the fact that the Oliver home, like a great majority of wizarding homes at the present time, was under the Fidelius Charm. This means that while He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named should not have been able to access the house, he clearly did.

The slaying occurred at approximately 4:45 p.m., and was reported to the Aurors by the Olivers' son Evan, who had been upstairs and came down when he heard unusual noises. The news spread quickly through the Ministry, where high-level officials called for calm. To the eyes and ears of this reporter, however, those officials themselves

were less than the perfect picture of calm. In an indication of the quickly spreading panic these killings are beginning to cause, no Ministry officials would speak for the record, even to condemn the murders. “What good will condemning them do?” asked one mid-level official. “Who doesn’t condemn murder? What’s important is that nobody wants to be the next target.”

Auror Leader Harry Potter would speak for the record, provided that his comments appeared in this article in full and unedited. The Prophet agreed, with the proviso that it would not print his use of the name of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The Leader was clearly unhappy, and reluctantly agreed to this condition, provided the Prophet made clear what it was doing. Potter’s use of the name has been substituted here with [he].

Q: What can you tell the people of the wizarding world, many of whom are wondering whether they will be on the wrong end of the day’s trio of murders?

A: I can say that we’re working very hard, doing our best to keep our eyes and ears open. I’d like to say, as I’ve said before, that we want to strongly urge people who witness anything strange to report it to Aurors at once.

Q: Forgive me, Leader Potter, but I can’t help but feel that your answer will not be of great reassurance to those I mentioned who are greatly concerned about their safety.

A: I understand that. But the very unfortunate fact is that there’s not much more I can say. [He] is extremely powerful, canny, and deadly. We Aurors are doing our best, but we cannot be everywhere at once, and his Disillusioning spell is so good that he can appear invisible even when in motion. We are confident that he will eventually be caught. What we cannot know is when.

Q: How was He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named able to penetrate the Olivers’ Fidelius Charm?”

A: We can’t know that, of course. Our best guess right now is that he put a spell we call a Temporary Trace on one of the three victims,

then when they Apparated, he Apparated to their home. The Temporary Trace breaks, for a very short time, the Fidelius Charm. There might have been a one-minute interval where he could enter their home by force.

Q: How did he track them? The Ministry has such tracking equipment, but He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named certainly should not.

A: I'd be extremely surprised if he did. We know that one of the victims was a classmate of [his] when he was at Hogwarts. We believe that he recognized her, and happened to know where she lived. He would then be able to Apparate there without tracking equipment or spells. I believe that this won't happen to most people who protect their home with the Fidelius Charm.

Q: Why do you believe he has begun these killings?

A: He had been controlling the government, which controls the Aurors, so he had control over society. Now I'm the Auror Leader, which gives me control over the Aurors, which takes away his hold on society—

Q: Do you mean—I apologize for interrupting, but do you mean that he who controls the Aurors controls society?

A: I mean that if you control the Aurors, you can control society if you choose. I don't choose to, because that isn't the role of the Auror Leader. But for him, I'm very sure that an important reason to control the Ministry was the control of the Aurors that it would bring. This was one of the important reasons he kept hidden: he didn't want Aurors looking for him, and he didn't want Aurors refusing Ministry orders on the grounds that the Ministry was controlled by [him].

Q: So, these people would not be dying if you hadn't become Auror Leader.

A: It's possible to look at it that way. But I think it's important to realize what the alternative would be: a government controlled by [him].

Q: With respect, Leader Potter, there would be many who say, at least no one was suffering under the previous government.

A: The fact is, many Muggle-borns were suffering. A few hundred lost their wands, dozens were sent to Azkaban and have suffered greatly. Twelve are missing and presumed dead. Those who aren't Muggle-borns tend to overlook this, and as you know but the Prophet hasn't reported, there's a movement among many Muggle-borns to emigrate. They say they don't want to be part of a society that would throw them overboard for its own protection.

Q: Is that what you believe happened?

A: I'm saying that's what they say. I understand why they say that, and I understand why most wizards didn't rise up in protest when it happened. Many were afraid to do so. But what you said about no one suffering before points up what's been going on. A segment of our society was cruelly repressed under the previous government, and the Prophet has devoted exactly no space to it. These people have a lot to say, and it's a discussion our society needs to have.

Q: Do these deaths, including those of your Muggle relatives, balance that?

A: No deaths balance other deaths. What I'm saying is that evil has to be opposed. It doesn't matter who's on the receiving end of it. It's just that simple.

Q: Do you think the Olivers' teenage children would feel better on hearing that?

A: Having lost several people close to me in this fight, I know very well that nothing I or anyone could say will make them feel better. All any of us can do is our best, and that's what I, and the other Aurors, will continue to do.

Q: Lastly, what advice would you give the people of the wizarding world, to stay safe?

A: The same as before, except that to be very sure that one doesn't have a Trace on them, it may be better to avoid Apparating directly to one's home. Aurors will set up a special area in the Ministry Atrium with special sensors to detect any magic. If one Apparates there and waits three minutes, one can go home with total confidence.

Q: Thank you for your time, Leader Potter.

* * * * *

In the spacious living room of Malfoy Manor, Draco Malfoy held up the newspaper. "Not your best interview, Potter."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Kingsley took seats; also present were Lucius and Blackstone. "I had a feeling you'd say that. I take it you agree, Mr. Blackstone?"

The old man inclined his head slightly. "Given the questions you received, it was to be expected. You are who you are, and you did what you felt was right. But of course, Draco is correct in that it was not effective in terms of rallying society together, as should be your goal. I have said before, and I will say again, that in a time such as this when society is under attack, efforts must be made to unify society rather than divide it. Your words, true as they were, contained strong hints of blame towards non-Muggle-borns, and many will feel defensive."

Harry struggled not to argue, because he still felt that he was right, even though he also knew Blackstone was right, in his own way. "What do you think I should have said?"

"In response to his comment that no one suffered, you should simply have disputed him without specifically mentioning to whom you were referring, and emphasized that your duty is to protect all of society. You could have added 'not only segments in favor' or some other such formulation. Most would have understood without feeling directly blamed."

"Maybe they should feel blamed," Ron challenged him. Draco shot him a hostile look; Blackstone had no reaction.

Kingsley spoke. "Ron, that doesn't help. Like it or not, Blackstone is right. It's the reality, and Harry needs to understand that. You know I sympathize with the Muggle-borns, but if I'd been there and known what Harry was going to say, I'd have told him not to say it. As it is, we're lucky that the Prophet didn't run some blaring headline like, 'Potter Says Wizard Lives Worth Sacrificing For Muggle-Borns.' That is what a lot of people will take away from it."

Ron wasn't satisfied. "Speaking as one who's risked his life for the benefit of all wizards, I don't have a problem with that."

Kingsley sighed. "I get that, Ron. It's your emotion talking, and there's nothing wrong with that. But Harry is, in effect, the leader of our society right now. He has to represent everyone, not pit one group against another, or do what'll be seen as that. If Voldemort were defeated right now, he'd have the luxury of trying to start a reconciliation, and again, he'd have to be seen as not taking sides. But with people dying, and him seen as responsible for keeping people safe, now isn't the time for that, however 'right' it is." Ron was unhappy, but didn't respond further.

Harry turned to his other close friend. "Hermione?"

She was also very unhappy. "As a Muggle-born, and one who understands history, I have to extremely reluctantly agree with Mr. Blackstone. Emotionally, of course, I feel like Ron does. I wouldn't disagree with anything you said yesterday. But Kingsley's right, this isn't the time. You can't be reminding people of what they did wrong when you're trying to rally them for a common purpose."

Discouraged, Harry said nothing, thinking. Draco turned to his godfather. Gesturing to Harry, he asked, "Can he walk this back? Assuming he's willing to?"

Blackstone nodded thoughtfully. "A carefully worded statement would repair some of the damage. Something that emphasizes that we are all in this together and should not point fingers, and that no such notion should be read into his remarks. That sort of thing. It should be written in advance, and as an aside I would advise the Leader to for

the time being only give interviews in which questions are in writing, with time to consult before responding.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I think I can learn from my mistakes.”

Blackstone nodded his acknowledgment. “No offense was intended. In such a sensitive situation, one can never be too careful.”

“I suppose I can’t argue with that,” Harry reluctantly conceded. “Okay. I’d like you to write the statement. But first, I’d like to ask you to accompany me to the Ministry. Tell me who I should talk to, be with me while I do it.”

“Why?” asked a surprised Ron.

“Two reasons. One, he can help reassure Ministry leaders who aren’t Muggle-friendly that I’m not trying to be divisive. Two, I’d like him to take their temperature with his ability, find out what the situation is over there.”

Harry saw from both Malfoys’ faces that they were pleased by the idea. “An excellent suggestion, Leader Potter,” said Blackstone. “But I should warn you that in the past I have made public statements about Muggle-borns that you would find objectionable. I have never been a friend of that community.”

Harry nodded. “All the better. Muggle-borns know I’m with them. I want mainline Slytherins to know I’m not against them.”

“Then, of course, I will do as you ask.”

The meeting with those chosen by Blackstone lasted for almost an hour, rather longer than Harry had hoped. Afterwards, Harry found a small meeting room for a private conversation with Blackstone. They took seats at the table.

“I thought it went well,” said Harry. “How about you?”

“Indeed, quite well,” answered Blackstone. “You were effective in assuring them that you would not neglect their interests, and that you

did not hold their support of the previous government against them.” A trace of amusement crept into the voice of the undemonstrative man. “Even though I did detect that on a few occasions you were, one could say, stretching the truth.”

Harry couldn’t help grinning a little. “You could say that. But Kingsley was right: I have to represent all the people, even the ones who did things I don’t approve of. I assume the power readings also showed it went well?”

Blackstone nodded. “They began somewhat suspicious, and surprised that I was advising you. That fact, and your later comments, reassured them, and their power signatures strengthened throughout the meeting as they grew confident that you were not a threat to their power. I believe you will read comments in tomorrow’s Prophet to the effect that Ministry officials are behind you.” With a wry upturn of the left side of his mouth, he added, “These comments will, of course, be anonymous. They are understandably concerned about their safety.”

“I suppose that is understandable,” agreed Harry. “So, there were some people you thought we should visit individually?”

They stood and exited the room. They had walked down a corridor and turned when Harry’s communication badge went off. “Code Yellow, Ministry, fifth floor, meeting room 5G.”

Harry broke into a run for the nearest stairs, but stopped himself after a few steps. He turned back to Blackstone. “With me, as fast as you can manage.”

The man walked briskly to fall in with Harry. “You should go ahead.”

“No. For all we know, that could be something to get me away from you. He might know you’re here.”

“No doubt he does,” responded Blackstone as he hurriedly ascended the stairs, “but you can Apparate. Are you not needed there?”

“It was a Code Yellow, which means that whatever happened has already happened. I could Apparate there, but I want that to be a

secret for as long as I can manage.” Having reached the top of the stairs, Harry looked down the hall and saw that two Aurors were already there. Blackstone gestured that he should feel free to run, and Harry did.

The Auror, a woman in her early fifties, met him at the entrance to the conference room. “This happened about ten minutes ago, according to our spells.” With a look that told Harry he wasn’t going to like what he saw, she gestured him inside.

Two men were slumped forward in their chairs; one had fallen onto the floor from his sitting position. Harry’s heart sank as he saw that one of those at the table was Arthur Weasley.

He was still awake eleven hours later, at the time of the switch. Physically tired and emotionally exhausted, he wanted to sleep, but he knew he should check in with Kingsley. He stood and left the tent.

About half of those on the island had fallen asleep on the other side and continued that sleep on the island. Others, including Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and George, were already at the main table. England had been very cold, but the island was its usual, comfortable low seventies after midnight.

At a distance, he could tell by Kingsley’s expression that Hermione was giving him the news about Arthur. He approached the table and took a seat while she gave Kingsley the essential details. Kingsley expressed his sympathy, as did others who hadn’t talked to Ron, Ginny, and George since the last switch. “I can only imagine how your counterparts are going to react when they get back there and get the news,” said Hermione sadly.

Kingsley nodded his agreement. “Speaking of which... Ron and Hermione, your counterparts told me they left a message in the Pensieve for you two and Harry. They wanted me to make sure you looked at it before you switch back.”

A few minutes later, they put their hands into the Pensieve, and were looking at the other Ron and Hermione. “We’d like to talk to the three

of you,” began Hermione, “about our Harry’s situation. We worry that not enough attention is being given to his problem.”

Ron spoke. “Now, we know that there was nothing that could be done until recently, because we and you were in hiding on our side. And we understand that with your Harry in the open as Auror Leader, it isn’t the easiest thing in the world for you to get treatment for our Harry.”

“But something may be possible,” continued Hermione. “And if it is, you’re going to have to be the ones to do it, since we’re only there for less than five hours at a time, at night, and less every day. It may be possible to find someone who would know something about this, and could keep it quiet.”

“Or,” said Ron, “there’s another possibility. We could take that Portkey to Australia and visit that family that your George met. Your Kingsley says the man is good and trustworthy, so I’m sure he could keep a secret. We could entrust him to inquire with people he knows—and Kingsley says he knows a number of people internationally—on the condition that nothing about this reaches England.”

“I know this wouldn’t be 100% safe,” said Hermione earnestly. “But our Harry has been in a coma for over a month, and we know that’s bad for his overall health. Something needs to be done. We know you, especially Harry, have your hands full right now. But my counterpart could look into it. Please think about it, and let us know what you might be able to do.” The memory finished.

Back in the tent, the three exchanged glances. “Um, Hermione,” said Ron, “correct me if I’m wrong, but wouldn’t it be really dangerous for you to even make inquiries? I mean, if you start talking about Horcruxes, and it gets back to Voldemort...”

“Yes, I thought of that too,” she agreed. “I must not be thinking very clearly.”

“I can understand why they’re frustrated,” ventured Harry.

“Oh, absolutely,” agreed Hermione. “I would be too. But I have to say, I really disagree with my other self. The risk factors in both of their suggestions are high. We don’t know that we can trust anyone in St. Mungo’s that strongly, and it’s a very big chance to take. And as for Australia, we can trust Foster, but can we be sure he won’t make a mistake in who he trusts? And the penalty for a mistake is a potentially catastrophic time paradox. We were going to keep George in a cell for risking that, and now, we’re going to do it ourselves?”

Harry spoke. “But if she suggested it, maybe the danger isn’t as high as you think.”

“I’m me, Harry. I know better than she does; I have more information. She isn’t being as rational as I would normally be.”

“Why do you think that would be?” asked Harry, puzzled.

“Maybe it’s because they spend all that time around that Harry,” suggested Ron. “And we’re taking over their lives, in a sense. Maybe they’re not happy about that, and it’s affecting the other Hermione’s judgment.”

She nodded. “It could be.”

“Could you leave the return message, Hermione?” Harry asked. “Tell them that of course we sympathize, and we’ll keep on the lookout for any way possible. But also mention the problems that we talked about.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make everything clear.”

“Good,” he said.

* * * * *

A half hour later, Harry was finishing telling the story to Luna as they sat on the sofa in his tent. He had been so busy throughout the day that he hadn’t had a chance to spend any time with her on the other side.

She shook her head sadly. "I felt so bad when I heard. I can't imagine what the Weasleys are going through."

"I decided I should be the one to tell them," he said, trying to hold down the emotions that the memory brought up. "But both with Ron, and with his mother, both of them knew just from looking at my face that someone had died. Both times, they just asked, 'who'. It was hard enough just to tell them that."

"Do you think Mr. Weasley was targeted?"

"Hermione asked the same question. It's hard to say, but I don't think so. Voldemort must have been walking around the Ministry invisible, saw Mr. Weasley by chance, and followed him to a meeting. But then again, he only started back at the Ministry with the new year, so Voldemort could have been waiting for him to become vulnerable. It's hard to say."

"I guess the Ministry people will be really nervous now," she said.

Harry grunted. "That's putting it mildly. Other Aurors and I were constantly being asked by Ministry people what we were going to do about protecting them. Some are talking about not coming in tomorrow."

"Could it reach a point," she wondered, "where society just shuts down because people are afraid to go out?"

"It's already getting close to that," he agreed. "We're getting dozens of requests, demands, people telling us that they aren't going out, or they aren't going out unless this or that is done. Now, we can't spend so much time on patrols, but it doesn't matter, because there's almost no one to protect on patrols. People aren't going out walking around, they're Apparating from place to place. What they want is to be able to go from one place to another and not have to be in an unsecured environment. I don't blame them, and we're spending most of the time working with the stationary magic specialists to set up barriers. What they tell me, and so far this hasn't appeared in the Prophet, is that they're not super-confident that anything they do can't be broken by Voldemort. His magic is so powerful, and his knowledge so

extensive, that they just can't be sure. And if it happens that he breaks through some barrier that we put up, people are just going to go nuts. It's doing real damage to society's morale, and I guess that's an understatement."

"Did a similar thing happen eighteen years ago?" she asked.

"I've asked Kingsley and Remus, and they said yes, there was a similar panic. That's why the Boy Who Lived became such a celebrity, people who feared for their lives saw him as some kind of savior. The difference between then and now is that now, people feel as though there was a choice, and that by becoming Auror Leader I made that choice for them. As Malfoy has said, a lot of them would just as soon I hadn't done anything. As long as they can deny it, they'd live under Voldemort if it meant they personally were safe. Back then, there wasn't the perception of a choice, so nobody blamed anybody."

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you think people blame you?"

He tilted his head. "I think not many people would use that word, though if the death count goes up by three per day for any length of time, more and more will. I think it's more that people can't help but notice that people they know, important people in society, weren't being bothered, and now they are. They were willing to ignore the Muggle-borns, but now they can't ignore it. As Kingsley said, they don't really want to blame me, because I'm Harry Potter, I'm the Auror Leader, and they know I'm doing my best. But their patience will run out at some point."

"What happens then?" she asked.

Harry shook his head, remembering something he'd been told. "I'm told that among the Aurors, there's a betting pool on which date a Prophet editorial suggests negotiating with Voldemort, offer him or some representative some position of influence in exchange for stopping the killing."

She frowned. "It seems like... an inappropriate thing to bet on."

"I think it's just gallows humor," he suggested. "Being an Auror can be a grim job, especially at a time like this. I think it's a kind of stress relief."

She held his hand in sympathy. "What are you going to do?"

"Like I said, the best I can. I just don't know if that's going to be enough."

She met his eyes, and he could see her confidence. "It will. You'll do it." He wasn't sure whether or not he could agree, but he would try. See yourself as she sees you, he said to himself, remembering something she'd once said in another situation. Be the person she sees. He would try to persuade himself that he could do it.

* * * * *

As the next week passed, things got no better. Objectively, they didn't get worse, but every day that passed in which three people were killed and Voldemort continued to elude the Aurors felt like a very bad day.

Contributing to the sense of crisis was the fact that most of those killed continued to be Ministry workers. The Prophet loudly trumpeted every day's deaths, and Harry and the Aurors came under ever-increasing pressure to do something to stop Voldemort. The fact was, for all their efforts, Harry knew that it was very possible that Voldemort simply could not be stopped.

On the morning of the eleventh Harry Apparated to the Park to eat in their mess area with other Aurors, as he had taken to doing over the past week. A dozen others were already there; house-elves dashed out to set up Harry's food. He exchanged greetings with the Aurors.

Mel held up the Prophet. "Amberson won the pool," she remarked, gesturing to the young man opposite her. "He picked the eleventh."

An older man named Landers spoke up. "Now, was that the date the editorial was written or..." With a half-smile, he trailed off as he was drowned out by derisive laughter.

"I will not be tricked out of my winnings," declared the young Auror.

"Can I see?" Harry asked Mel. She handed him the paper, folded open to the editorial in question. Shaking his head, Harry started to read.

Conversation continued around him. "What I liked," said Mel, "was the bit about appeasement... what did he say exactly?"

Another Auror read from her paper. "Of course we do not intend to suggest appeasement..."

"Of course not," said the older Auror sarcastically. "Merlin forbid."

"Yeah, that was great," agreed Mel. "When they go out of their way to tell you that they're not suggesting appeasement—"

Two others joined her in chorus. "That's how you know they're suggesting appeasement."

"What does everyone think the reaction will be?" asked Amberson.

"Public or Ministry reaction?" asked another.

"Both," he said.

"Ministry," said Mel, "can be predicted pretty easily. Waffling, no real comment one way or the other until they know the public reaction. The public, that's more difficult. Most won't like the idea, though more for the appearance than the practical result."

Landers spoke again. "If you gave people Veritaserum, and one of the choices was 'I would support sharing power with Dark wizards provided that I was not told that that was what was happening, and I could pretend that nothing morally objectionable was going on', that would be the one they'd pick."

"Sure, if you make it easy for them," joked Mel.

“Well, look at us,” said the young woman. “We were pretending that nothing was going on, and we knew better—”

The older man took offense. “We work for the Ministry! What were we supposed to do?”

“What Tonks, Kingsley, Hestia—”

“And if we’d all done that, Dark wizards would have become the new Aurors—”

“Hey, c’mon, c’mon, break it up,” urged Mel loudly. “We’ve had this argument dozens of times, let’s not have it again. Harry has come to lead us out of the wilderness.”

Harry put down the paper. “And it seems like a lot of the Ministry would just as soon I hadn’t. I think I know, but let me ask you... when the Thicknesse government took over, did the Ministry know—”

A few of the older ones cut Harry off with loud chuckles. “Sure they knew,” said a middle-aged man named Anton Callis. “Reichstag, 1933.”

“Decree of Banishment, 1382,” responded Landers.

“I knew you were going to say that,” said Callis, apparently amused.

Harry looked at them with a ‘what’s going on?’ expression. “Oh, this is new for Harry!” said Mel, feigning excitement. “I’m sure he’ll enjoy this. History lectures, and only a little less boring than Binns’.”

“Feel free to fall asleep,” said Landers casually.

“Oh, I usually do,” she agreed. To Harry, she explained, “These two are history buffs. I should say, magical history, but Anton here also knows quite a lot about Muggle history, so we get to hear about that too. They have this little competition where they try to think of the most pertinent historical parallels for whatever situation is being discussed.”

Callis spoke animatedly. "1382 was the last time an unapologetically and unabashedly Dark wizard ruled England," he explained. "There was a Council of Advisers at that time—"

"Oh, I remember something about this," said Harry. "Lund-something?"

"Lundhoffsens, yes," agreed Callis. "Anyway, the Council had some power, but they didn't want to risk opposing Lundhoffsens, so they wrote up a Banishment Decree, basically dissolving their own body. They still retained some local power, however. The Reichstag, which I think is a more apt parallel, handed over their power to Hitler in a way that was supposed to be temporary, but most knew would actually be permanent. They remained a rubber stamp for Hitler."

"Can we really say the Ministry gave away their power?" asked Amberson. "I thought it was more that it was taken away."

"On the surface, it was taken away," agreed Callis. "But many of the department heads and Undersecretaries knew that the Dark wizards were back, and trying to take control. There had been unofficial talks, and the high-ranking people were afraid of being assassinated by You-Know-Who—"

"Excuse me?" interrupted Harry sharply.

Mel chuckled. "I love how Hedghorn's cracks don't bother him, but he gets really annoyed when anyone says 'You-Know-Who.'"

"Can't fault his priorities," remarked Landers.

"Anyway," said Callis wearily, "In deference to the Leader, they were afraid of being assassinated by Voldemort, so they agreed not to oppose Thicknesse being Minister. Now, to be fair, they didn't know Thicknesse would be under the Imperius Curse; they just thought he'd be someone who would represent the interests of the Dark wizards to some extent. They didn't exactly realize they were handing over the keys to the store—"

"Oh, I don't buy that," cut in Landers. "That's what they say now—"

Harry heard Luna's voice in his head. "Ron just Apparated over, he says he needs to talk to you, urgently. He wants you to meet him at Grimmauld Place."

Looking upwards, he saw Ron's face through Luna's eyes. "Tell him I'll be there in a few seconds." He stood, putting a large, last bite of food on his fork. "Ron's calling, says it's urgent. Gotta run."

"If it's anything for us, we'll be here," said Mel. Harry nodded as he chewed the last bite, and Disapparated.

In the living room of Grimmauld Place he saw Ron, Hermione, and Malfoy, the latter of which was a bit of a surprise. "What's up?"

"I asked him to get you," said Malfoy. "Fastest way, since I don't have access to Luna's place. Would you all Apparate over to Malfoy Manor for a few minutes? It might be nothing, but I want to know what you think."

Curious now, Harry nodded, and they were suddenly in the Apparition parlor of Malfoy Manor. Nodding greetings to Lucius, Narcissa, and Blackstone, who was still staying with them at Lucius and Draco's request, Harry asked, "What is it?"

Malfoy pointed to an envelope on a table. "That arrived about fifteen minutes ago. It's for me, and when my father tried to take it off the owl, his hand went right through it. I, on the other hand, can touch it."

Harry exchanged surprised looks with Ron and Hermione. "Hermione, are you familiar with this?"

She nodded. "I've read about it. It's very unusual, because it's not considered so necessary, since you can get an owl that will only surrender its message to the person himself. It's also unusual because to do it, you need a hair or other physical material from the person—" Her mouth fell open as realization dawned. She looked at Malfoy. "Is it?"

He gave a small nod. "I think so. From the Dark Lord."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 18, Feints and Lures: When a chance to capture Voldemort presents itself, Harry must decide whether it's an opportunity or a trap.

From Chapter 18: Lucius gave him a level stare. "I do not think it likely, but regardless, you should give her Veritaserum without further hesitation. There is nothing to be lost by trying."

"Well, her tongue," Harry couldn't help but point out.

Chapter 18

Feints and Lures

A chill went down Harry's spine. "If it is... it could be a threat..."

"Or an invitation," Ron finished.

"That's what I assume," Malfoy agreed. "But we're getting ahead of ourselves. I'm not even sure it's him. But the style of paper is one my father says he's known to use. Potter, do you see anything?"

Harry looked at it carefully. "No."

"Granger? Analyze?"

She cast the spell and shook her head.

"I thought that might be the case. Better to be sure, though. I guess there's nothing left to do but open it."

"Is that such a good idea?" asked Ron. "I mean, if it's an invitation, you won't take it, and if it's a threat, why do you need to see that? I don't see how it benefits you to open it."

Malfoy looked at his father, who regarded Ron patiently. "Knowing the Dark Lord as I do, I am confident that while opening it may be dangerous, not opening it would be more so."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, I see. Like a Howler, but... nastier."

"Rather," agreed Lucius dryly.

Harry could see the apprehension in Narcissa's eyes as her son warily approached the letter, picked it up, and opened it. Harry kept watch for unseen magic, but none revealed itself. Malfoy glanced up at Harry, who shook his head.

Malfoy read it out loud. "You are to be given a chance that few get. You failed in your task; this was likely due to your youth, and a failure

of nerve. Unlike your father, you did not actively betray me. I offer you a second chance. If you accept it, and fulfill your role without failure, your family will be safe, and you will be well rewarded. Appear at the following location at 3:00 p.m. alone..." Malfoy skipped over the location. "There will be a Portkey." Malfoy put it down. "That's all."

"So," said Harry casually. "You gonna do it?"

Malfoy held Harry's gaze for a few seconds until Harry's mouth curled up at the edges ever so slightly. "You're hysterical, Potter," said Malfoy, rolling his eyes.

"Harry!" Hermione chastised him. "That's nothing to joke about!"

Harry shrugged lightly. "Probably the Aurors' influence. They really like black humor. It's positively grim. You'd be appalled," he added to Hermione.

"But I'm a little surprised," he went on, "and Mr. Blackstone, I'd like to know what you think, but... isn't this a sign of weakness?"

The old man gave a small smile. "It is indeed, Leader Potter. You have captured enough of his assistants to put a serious crimp in his operations. He is not in a favorable situation, and this is evidence of that."

"But he's killing three people a day," Ron pointed out.

"Indeed, and the fact that he has been reduced to this speaks volumes."

"Reduced?" repeated Ron in surprise. "He's causing chaos and fear all over the place!"

"Yes, but this is not what he would rather be doing," said Blackstone, with the tone of one giving a lecture. "What he is doing is the best he can do under the circumstances. Twenty years ago, he killed for the sake of enjoyment, to create fear, and especially, to create a reputation. Now he has that, and what he wants is power. Leader Potter abruptly interrupted that goal, so his short-term goal is to re-

establish his reputation, and more importantly, to be seen as a more powerful force than Leader Potter. He sees Draco as a possible means to accomplish this. This is, I believe, the sign of weakness that Leader Potter was referring to: that the Dark Lord would accept one who turned his back on him is astonishing, something that he never before would have contemplated.”

“But he must know that Draco’s not going to do it,” pointed out Hermione.

“I suspect,” said Lucius, “that he feels that he loses nothing in trying.”

“Indeed,” agreed Blackstone. “And I am sure he feels he has a good ‘hook’: he will believe that Draco is jealous of Leader Potter’s power. As the Dark Lord sees it, Draco and Leader Potter were the two leaders in their class, at opposite ends of the ideological pole. He knew that you two strongly disliked each other. As it happened, you found common purpose, and found that you had more in common than you might have suspected. But the Dark Lord will believe that at some level the feud is still continuing, and that your ascension to Auror Leader, famous and admired, will leave Draco seething, having lost the power competition.”

Malfoy grunted. “Right now, I’m more interested in the survival competition.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, I think I get it. He thinks that because that’s how he’d feel if it was him.”

“Exactly,” agreed Blackstone.

“Okay,” said Harry. “Well, I’m glad it didn’t turn out to be any worse than that. The security situation here is still okay, right?” He looked at Lucius.

“Fine, thank you,” Lucius responded. “The letter should pose no threat at this point.”

“Well, you never know,” said Harry. “I’ll be getting back, I have some meetings with some stationary magic and other specialists.”

“Oh, is some plan going?” asked Draco.

Slightly embarrassed, Harry shook his head. “Just for my general knowledge. As Auror Leader, in this situation, I need to understand it a lot better than I do now. It was hard enough for me to agree to the meeting without Hermione sitting next to me, to help if I got confused,” he added humorously. “It’s such a habit. Okay, see you later.” He and his friends headed for the Apparition parlor.

He sat in meetings and demonstrations for the better part of the afternoon, breaking only for lunch, and two one-hour periods to do Diagon Alley patrols. He also occasionally did patrols through the halls of the Ministry, since a little over half of the killings had taken place there. Barriers were now up, and yesterday’s killings had been of people whose Fidelius Charms had weaknesses. Harry took that as a good sign, in that it was becoming harder to find people to kill. At the same time, of course, living under such tight security was stressful and wearying for many people, and it couldn’t continue indefinitely. When Harry did his patrols, he tried to keep up people’s spirits, urge them to tolerate the difficulties in the name of defeating Voldemort. It seemed to help for those he talked to, but he couldn’t talk to everybody. At some point, the editorial advocating compromise—appeasement, Harry called it in his mind—would become common sense to many people.

One person shopping for food was killed early in the afternoon, then in a severe blow to Harry, the other two—interrupting the last magic instruction session—were Aurors on patrol. He supposed they had been caught off guard, but it was extremely bad, both for Auror morale and social morale in general: if Aurors were not safe, who was? Of course, Aurors were more visible targets, doing patrols, but it was assumed they could take care of themselves.

As he ate dinner in the Auror mess, the atmosphere was subdued, far less chatty than usual. In some ways he felt like an outsider; he’d barely known those who died, having only had one short conversation with each of them. He wasn’t yet a real part of them, yet at the same time, the most important part of all, the one who was responsible.

After he ate, he passed Tonks coming in, and she asked for a word with him alone. They sat in a small room usually used for interrogations.

He knew from her face that she was going to speak seriously. "Harry, I wanted to be sure you knew that you shouldn't blame yourself for things like what happened today."

"Why do you think I am?" he asked.

"Well, your face," she said. "It's written all over it. But also, if it was me, I'd feel that way. It wouldn't be rational, but I would anyway. So I'm pretty sure you do as well. Remember, when he was around twenty years ago, there wasn't much the Aurors could do then either. Some were killed, the Longbottoms were captured. In a full-blown fight, it'd be amazing if things like what happened today didn't happen.

"I wanted to tell you that, and more importantly, that you should talk to people. I mean, about what you're going through, the stress you're under. I'm told that you're not the chattiest person about your feelings. But you have Luna, you have Ron and Hermione, and any number of other people you can unburden yourself to, who would be happy to help—"

"Leader Potter, Code yellow," announced his badge, indicating that the call was for him alone. "Outside Gringotts."

"Acknowledged," he replied, and the line went dead. To Tonks, he said in surprise, "There's already been three today."

"Maybe it's something else," she suggested. "C'mon, let's go."

He Disapparated, and appeared within a few meters of Spencer and another Auror whose name he couldn't remember. They were standing near someone else, someone whose presence didn't really register with him. "What's up?" he asked Spencer.

The older man turned to Harry. "It's not confirmed, but I wanted you here in case it pans out. We have a woman who was in Gringotts, was about to leave. She overheard another woman talking to

Gringotts officials, who wanted to see her vault. That woman kept her voice low, but our witness is sure she heard her say, 'My name is Bellatrix Lestrange.' She would have been under Polyjuice Potion, and she would have had to tell the goblins that."

Harry nodded. "That would be big, of course. Where's the witness?"

Spencer gestured to the woman standing near him, who Harry only now noticed. "I did a Slide," he explained. "She's a little nervous."

Looking at her for the first time, Harry felt that 'nervous' was an understatement. "You said you wanted me to talk to the Leader," she said anxiously. "Can I do it and get out of here? If they know I did this—"

"Calm down, ma'am," he said. "It'll be okay—"

Her eyebrows went up in indignation. "Ma'am? I'm only twenty-nine. That's a little young to be called ma'am."

Harry was taken aback. "Well, what should I call you?"

"You could call me Linda."

"I didn't know your name was Linda," he pointed out.

"You could have asked."

Harry tried not to express his annoyance at having been sidetracked. "Harry," Spencer said in a low voice, "we don't have all the time in the world. She's in her vault, but could come—"

"Got it. Linda, what did the woman you saw look like?"

"I already told them," she said irritably. "Shoulder-length blond hair, youngish. Maybe my age. Someone you wouldn't call ma'am."

Harry barely managed not to roll his eyes. Bet she's not really twenty-nine, he thought. She really has a thing about this. "What's your job?"

"I work for a small company that harvests and buys wood," she said quickly. "Only the best. For brooms, magical household uses, and so forth. I work in the office, I help the sales staff."

"How do you know who Bellatrix Lestrange is? Not everyone does."

"I have a friend who was a friend of the Longbottom family. He talked about it once." Every answer contained a tone of 'is this the last one? I need to get out of here.'

He was about ready to let her go. "Linda, what's your last name?"

A nervous glance. "Stafford."

Harry's senses registered a lie. He pulled her aside and spoke in a whisper. "Linda, I might need to talk to you again. This is very important. If I have to go to your office to find you, that'll be more you'll have to explain to them. Please tell me."

Eyes wide that he'd known she was lying, she leaned in. "Why do you need to know?"

"Linda, we might be making life-or-death decisions based on this information. Any little detail about what happened here could be important, and I need to be able to find you again in case something needs to be checked." His eyes implored her not to argue further.

She sighed. "Withers," she whispered. "No one but you's to know."

He nodded. "Thank you, Linda, and thank you very much for letting us know this. You can go." Barely a second after he finished speaking, she Disappeared.

Spencer looked at the spot she'd Disappeared from. "Bit skittish."

"That's putting it mildly," agreed Harry. He suddenly had the thought that if somehow something happened to her, he would feel responsible. He remembered what Tonks had said; he knew he shouldn't. But he would anyway.

A minute later, a woman matching the description Withers had given emerged from the hallway that led to the vaults, in the company of a goblin. As had been the case when they'd captured Goyle and the others, Harry saw the appearance fluctuate between that of Lestranger and the form she had taken. It's her, all right, he thought. He remembered all the misery she'd caused Neville. Anger hardened as he recalled how she'd tortured Neville, how she'd enjoyed it.

Harry made sure he and the others were standing where they couldn't be seen from the inside. Looking around, he saw that Spencer and the other Auror had already put up overlapping anti-Disapparation fields; he decided to contribute his own. Can't be too careful, he thought. All of Gringotts was well known to be immune from Apparition, so there was no way she'd get away.

As she walked toward the door, she took out her wand, clearly intending to Disapparate as soon as she exited Gringotts. Harry didn't want to subdue her on Gringotts property... only a few more seconds...

She was out. She tried, and failed, to Disapparate, and went down under multiple Stunners. Normally, she'd be taken to headquarters for interrogation, but Harry had something unconventional in mind.

For the second time that day, Harry Apparated in the Apparition parlor of Malfoy Manor; Kingsley, carrying Lestranger, followed a second later. Having been warned of their arrival, Draco, Lucius, Narcissa, and Blackstone were there to greet them. "Bella!" gasped Narcissa.

Harry walked over to her. "Mrs. Malfoy, this is very important. She could have time-sensitive information, and I need the opinion of your husband and the others. But I'd urgently ask that you leave the room; it would be a distraction for her to see you here. She could know where he is right now. This may be the best chance we get."

She looked at her husband and Blackstone; they both nodded their agreement with Harry's request. With a last look at her sister, she walked upstairs.

Kingsley set Lestrangle down in a chair and bound her to it without waking her. Harry spoke to his hosts. "She was identified at Hogwarts by a woman I'm pretty sure isn't connected to Voldemort." He explained the pertinent information as quickly as he could. "He'll be waiting for her, or there'll be a rendezvous point. Is that right?"

Lucius nodded. "If there is a meeting time, he will not wait past the deadline. If he needed money enough to risk sending her to Gringotts—which is surprising, but hardly inconceivable—he will be eager for it. He will be there."

"Would he need it enough to wait past the deadline?" asked his son.

Lucius shook his head. "I would be shocked if he did. All his assistants know that keeping him waiting is unacceptable. If they do not show up, he assumes something beyond their control has occurred."

"Okay," said Harry, wanting to waste no time. "Kingsley, wake her up."

She opened her eyes, needing only a second to take in her surroundings. "Traitors," she spat, looking at Blackstone and the Malfoys with, as he well remembered, eyes behind which madness and torment lay. He wondered what had happened to this woman to cause her to end up like this. "You all will die at the time of the Dark Lord's inevitable victory—"

"And as his most faithful servant you'll have a place of honor at his feet, etcetera etcetera," Harry said briskly and offhandedly. "We don't have time for that. Where is he going to be waiting for you?"

"As if I would tell you, you miserable, Mudblood-loving piece of—"

Harry silenced her. "Man, that gets tiresome. Okay, I tried. Mr. Malfoy, you know what happened with Goyle. What do you think the chances are that he's put that on her tongue?"

Lucius gave him a level stare. "I do not think it likely, but regardless, you should give her Veritaserum without further hesitation. There is nothing to be lost by trying."

"Well, her tongue," Harry couldn't help but point out.

"A tongue that will not help us in any case," responded Lucius. "Lives are at stake, Leader Potter. You must do what needs to be done." Blackstone nodded his firm agreement.

Harry had been leaning in that direction already, so he waited no further. "Kingsley," he gestured.

The Auror took out the vial of Veritaserum, and using magic to force Lestrange's mouth open, poured the contents onto her tongue. To Harry's mild surprise, there was no obvious result. Lucius was right, he thought.

He un-Silenced her. "Can you understand me?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange."

"What is the time and place of your next scheduled meeting with Voldemort?"

"It is to be no later than 6:30 p.m., at a spot three miles south of Hogsmeade. I know where it is, but cannot describe the place any further without a map. He has been staying in a temporary magical shelter."

Like one of the tents we use, thought Harry. "Why did you go to Gringotts?"

"The Dark Lord ordered me to."

Harry rolled his eyes, annoyed with himself for wasting time; the questions had to be precise. “Weren’t you or he concerned that by going there, you’d expose yourself to capture?”

“I was not concerned. If he was, I saw no indication.”

“Did you deliberately allow yourself to be captured?”

“No.”

“Did Voldemort send you on this mission so that we would capture you and you would give us information he wanted us to have?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“In preparing for this mission, did the thought ever occur to you that he sent you out intending that you be captured?”

“Yes.”

Harry exchanged looks with the Malfoys. “How likely did you consider this possibility?”

“Highly unlikely.”

“Was it a concern, or a passing thought?”

“A passing thought.”

Harry looked at his watch; it was 6:13. He immediately realized the dilemma; ironically, he wouldn’t have understood it so well if he hadn’t had advanced instruction on stationary magic earlier that day.

It was possible to set up a field that would have an adverse effect on anyone who Apparated into its midst. Such fields, examples of which included the anti-Disapparation and Muggle-repelling fields at Hogwarts, normally extended no farther than three hundred meters. But Voldemort was probably the most powerful wizard alive, and it wouldn’t be safe to Apparate to within a mile of the given location. The Aurors would have to Apparate to a safe distance first, conduct

tests to determine whether a field existed or not, then advance another hundred meters, and repeat. By the time this was done, it would be well past six-thirty. Harry was reasonably sure, but he wanted it confirmed.

“Kingsley, how much time would it take to do this safely?”

“More time than we have.”

“Specifically.”

“If we did it as quickly as possible, thirty minutes.”

“Assemble the Aurors, brief them on the mission. After that’s done, come back here for the final word.” Kingsley nodded and departed.

Harry turned to Lucius. “Mr. Malfoy, if this is a trap, and the Aurors Apparate to within two hundred meters, what’s the worst that could happen to them under any field you think he could do?”

“The Dark Lord’s magical capabilities must never be underestimated,” said Malfoy solemnly. “I would say the worst case would be unconsciousness. But that is the same as death, since he would, having made himself immune to the field, simply Apparate to their location and dispatch them one by one.”

“If it’s a trap, how long would he personally have to spend setting up the necessary stationary magic?”

Lucius thought for a moment. “At least six hours. Probably more like eight.”

“If there’s a field extending more than two hundred yards, what are the chances it was a trap?”

This time, Lucius answered immediately. “One hundred percent. He would not cast such a wide field.”

“What’s the widest field you could imagine him casting?”

Lucius answered as Harry had thought. "One mile in every direction from his location. Even that much would be very unlikely."

Now for the big question, thought Harry. Lucius knows Voldemort better than anyone here. "Do you think this is a trap?"

"No," answered Lucius. "I have never known the Dark Lord to do something like this. It seems very unlike him, and I do not think he would sacrifice Bella so easily."

"Level of confidence."

"Eighty percent." Harry got the impression that Lucius had anticipated the question.

Harry looked to Lucius's right. "Draco. What do you think?"

Draco was clearly uncomfortable. "I think I'm glad I'm not the one who has to make this decision."

"Seriously."

"Seriously, honestly, I can't offer an opinion. I don't know the Dark Lord well enough to judge something like this."

"What's your gut?"

"That it's a trap." Harry saw Lucius look at his son in surprise; Draco shrugged slightly, as if to say, he asked for my gut, not reasons I can defend.

"Mr. Blackstone?"

"I believe it is genuine, but not with a high level of confidence. The amount of time and resources expended versus the highly speculative nature of the effort suggests that it would not be a wise tactical move, and the Dark Lord is an excellent tactician."

"Yes, it is speculative," agreed Harry. "But if he wins, he wins big."

“True. The same could be said for you, of course.”

Harry nodded, and something about what Blackstone had said struck a chord, but he wasn't yet sure how or why.

“Leader Potter,” said Lucius, “We only have eight minutes. I will volunteer to Apparate to within a hundred and twenty meters of the given location. If it is not a trap, there will be enough time to apprehend him.”

“Father!” gasped Draco. “You can't do that!”

“And if it is a trap, you'll die,” pointed out Harry. Lucius responded with a stare that said, ‘what's your point?’ Harry shook his head. “No. I appreciate the offer, but I'm not going to treat your life as any more disposable than the Aurors—”

Kingsley Apparated in, and walked quickly from the Apparition parlor. “They're ready.”

“Your opinion?”

“Not a trap. Unknown confidence level.” In other words, thought Harry, it's his gut.

“How long do I have before the decision's no longer mine?”

Kingsley looked at his watch. “A minute and a half.”

Decision time, thought Harry. It felt like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. Guess wrong one way, and Aurors—it would have to be at least five, ten to be more sure—lose their lives. Guess wrong the other way, and a chance to catch Voldemort slips through his fingers. He looked down, thinking hard, unconscious of the eyes on him.

The thought occurred to him to go himself, start from a far distance, and rely on his ability to see magic to determine whether it was safe to move forward. He found that never having encountered such a wide magical field, he wasn't confident that this ability extended to all

stationary magic. After all, he realized, Hogwarts' magic wasn't visible to him. He couldn't take the chance.

The woman, Linda, had overheard when Lestrangle didn't expect her to. Did she just have good hearing? Was Voldemort in Gringotts, casting a spell on the woman to enable her to hear? How likely was that? I can see why most of them think it's genuine; thinking it's a trap almost requires you to be paranoid...

The exchange with Blackstone suddenly hit him. If he wins, he wins big... but the same is true for me. If he wanted to trap me, what's the best bait he could have? Himself. Give me the chance to get him, and I'm under so much pressure... young Auror Leader, impatient, might grab at any chance that looks good... make a decision that gets Aurors killed, they and the people lose confidence in me... worse, I lose confidence in myself...

He wondered if he was being paranoid, then realized there wasn't time to debate it further: the time was up. Right or wrong, he'd made the decision. He turned to Kingsley.

"Take her back, get the location from her. Send out ten Aurors. Have them start from one point two miles out, and work their way in."

Kingsley nodded solemnly, picked up Lestrangle, slung her over his shoulder, and headed out.

Draco looked at him sympathetically. "Why?"

Harry shook his head. "It's too good."

"I hope you're right."

"Me, too."

The passing of the seconds, then minutes, was an exquisite torment. Now, if he was wrong, lives would be lost that otherwise wouldn't be. He tried not to second-guess himself. Blackstone spoke. "You must keep in mind, Leader Potter, that whatever the result of this, you have performed well. Some questions have no right answer, some

decisions must be made on the basis of nothing more than a flip of a coin. You asked what you needed to ask, you weighed the factors, and made a prudent judgment. If it turns out that you could have had him, you must keep this in mind.” Harry nodded, appreciating the man’s words. He wondered how much they would comfort him if he was wrong.

Five minutes later—it had felt like much longer—Kingsley Apparated in. Harry stood as Kingsley walked over to give his report.

Kingsley’s face didn’t betray what he was about to say. “The field started at eight hundred meters.” It had been a trap.

Harry exhaled heavily. “Thank you. Have them continue taking down the field until they get to the location. Not that they’re likely to find anything, but you never know.”

“Okay,” said Kingsley, and headed back to the Apparition parlor.

Harry closed his eyes and took another deep breath. Hell of a job this is, he thought. Opening his eyes, he saw the three residents of the home looking at him. “Thank you all for your help,” he said.

“Congratulations,” said Blackstone.

Harry shook his head. “I was lucky. The coin came up heads.”

“That may be, but as I said, you were prudent. I suspect you will find the Aurors highly appreciative.”

Harry nodded, and turned to leave. As he walked into the Apparition parlor, Draco entered behind him. Lowering his voice, he said, “Thank you for not taking my father’s offer.” Again, Harry nodded his acknowledgment, and Disapparated.

* * * * *

Over the next few hours Harry found that Blackstone’s prediction had been highly accurate; at least a dozen Aurors either congratulated Harry for not falling into the trap, or expressed their appreciation that

he had been careful with their lives. A few told him that in his position, they would have done the riskier thing. One said he would probably have gone deep into the field himself—an idea that Harry had to admit had never occurred to him—and pointed out that the Leader had to be as careful with his own life as he was with others'. This idea had never occurred to Harry either.

As he prepared for the switch—that night's would be about four and a half hours, and the next night, less than four—he thought about the fact that he had made the correct call on a crucial decision, and gained significant respect among the Aurors. Normally, it would be a good day. But he had to not forget that two Aurors had died earlier that day, and that three people were still dying every day. I can't be satisfied until this thing is over.

Two hours later, on the island, having finished telling the Auror trainees the story of the day's events, Harry relaxed in his tent with Luna. They were on the sofa, very close together, arms around each other.

"I tell you, that was so hard," he said, still shaking his head at the memory of how close it had been, how easily he could have made a disastrously wrong decision. "That's by far the hardest decision I've had to make since becoming Auror Leader."

"Even harder than allowing George to leave the island?" she wondered.

"I hadn't thought of that," he admitted. "But yes, I think so. In that case, at least I had the comfort of knowing that if the timeline vanished, I wouldn't be around to realize what a huge mistake I'd made. But this one... wrong either way, and I'd have to live with it. That's pretty frightening."

She gripped him harder, but said nothing. After a minute of silence, she spoke. "It's hard to know what to say. I feel like I want to comfort you, but I don't know how. All I can tell you is that you're a good man, and I love you."

"That's pretty good right there," he said, with a small smile. "No, I suppose there wouldn't be much you could say. I'm going to have to be making those kind of decisions for many years to come."

"Well, hopefully, the need to make such a big decision will be much less, since it'll usually be the case that there are no terrible Dark wizards out there. You shouldn't even have to be doing this at all."

"Well, since we're here anyway..." he started, jokingly. Only then did he realize that Luna's last sentence could be a self-criticism. He decided to cease any further attempts at humor. "We just have to do the right thing."

"That's what you do," she agreed.

They sat in silence again, taking comfort in the physical contact, the touch of their hands. He leaned over and kissed her, then sat back again. He thought about the future. He had an idea, and decided he should share it quickly, before he lost his nerve.

"Luna... I just realized I hadn't said this before, and I wanted to say that I love you." She smiled, but speaking quickly and nervously, he didn't pause long enough for her to say anything. He continued, "I was thinking that we should... um..." He realized he hadn't thought out the exact words he would use. "That we should... you know..."

She looked at him in the way that only she could, with the expressive eyes and the matter-of-fact tone. "Have sex?"

He smiled nervously at her frank use of the words. "Yes. That."

She smiled as well. "Okay, I just wanted to be sure we were on the same page. I mean, it wouldn't do for me to be expecting to have sex, and then you get out the chess set."

He laughed. "Do you play chess?"

"Sure," she said, to his surprise. "I'm not that good, but I've played it. One problem I always had was that I tended to play defensively,

since if a piece was taken, I felt sorry for it. People always said playing against me was boring.”

“The last thing you are is boring.”

“Thank you, I’m glad to hear that. But I wanted to ask you, about what you said before... why now?”

He became somber again. “Because I was thinking, one of us could die. Probably me, of course. And I wouldn’t want to die not having done this with you.”

Her eyebrows went up a little. With kindness and humor, she replied, “I don’t know what’s the usual way to get a woman in the mood for love, but I’m pretty sure that isn’t it.”

He looked down, then back up at her. “I’m serious.”

“I know. I was too, even if it sounded like a joke.” She adjusted her position to more easily look directly at him. “Harry, I love you very, very much. The fact that you love me means more to me than anything. And I’m really looking forward to doing this with you. But when we look back on this in the future, I don’t want to remember that the reason we did it was that we were afraid we were going to die. Does that make any sense?”

It did, though he didn’t want to admit it. “Then when would we do it? There’s always going to be that risk, with me.”

Earnestly, she replied, “We’ll know when the time is right. Trust me. We won’t even have to say anything to each other. We’ll just know.”

Reluctantly, he nodded. “Okay. I think this is the kind of thing you know better than I do.”

She moved back to the position she’d been in before, snuggling against him; he put his arm around her shoulders again. “I had an odd dream last night.”

“What was it?”

"It felt like I was in a Hogwarts class, but it was a little different. It always is in dreams, as you know."

"Actually, I'm not sure I do. I don't remember my dreams very well."

"Really? You should try to. They can contain interesting information."

He shrugged. "The only ones I remember anything of didn't make any sense at all."

"Well, yes, that's part of the whole thing. You have to interpret them. Anyway, the teacher—it was a woman, someone I've never seen before—was trying to get me to understand something. There were other people in the class, but it seemed like she was talking only to me. One thing I remember she said was, 'what goes up, must come down.'

"Hmmm," said Harry, mildly interested. "Not exactly profound."

"Yes, that's true. But as I said, it could have meanings not readily apparent. Another thing I remember was, 'to everything, there is a season.' And then at one point, I was throwing a boomerang around. I was able to do it well, even though I've never thrown one before."

"Interesting. I'm surprised you'd know the quotation, the second one you mentioned. It's from the Bible."

"What's that?"

Even though he'd lived in the wizarding world for over seven years, it was still strange that someone wouldn't know what the Bible was. "It's a Muggle holy book, the most important one in Muggle culture. That phrase is a popular quotation from that."

"Oh, I see. I must have heard it somewhere before, but I'm not sure where. Did you know that there's a sort of a ban on Muggle holy books at Hogwarts?"

"No, really?"

She nodded. "It's unofficial, but it's there. I did take Muggle Studies. It was very interesting; the professor said she wanted to teach about Muggle religions, but that it was one thing when she joined the school that she was told she couldn't do. Apparently a little over fifty years ago there was a scandal; some of the students started getting a little too interested in some of those books, maybe this Bible you mentioned. The parents got really angry, and it ended up that the Ministry forbade Hogwarts to teach that, or to keep any copies in the library. The professor said that Professor Dumbledore apologized for the fact that she couldn't. She asked if she could teach that it was banned and why, and he said yes, of course. So, she did."

"Wow. Interesting. I never read the Bible. My aunt, I remember, liked to pretend to people she knew that they were a churchgoing family, but they hardly ever went. Maybe a few times a year. My uncle and cousin were always bored to death, but my aunt insisted they had to go for the sake of appearances. I, of course, wasn't required to go. Not being considered a part of the family had its advantages."

She regarded him sorrowfully. "I can't imagine growing up with people who didn't consider me part of their family. I wonder if that's why you weren't so broken up when they died, on the other side."

"It hit me hard," he admitted, "but only in the sense that I felt responsible. I got so caught up in what was happening over there that I totally forgot that I should check on them, that what happened on my side didn't necessarily happen on their side. So they died when it was avoidable, and of course, in the most gruesome way possible. I still feel bad about that. But I'd be lying if I said that I'd miss them. Wonder if Voldemort would've bothered if he'd known that. He probably thought he was dealing me this huge emotional blow."

She held his hand, saying nothing. After a minute, he asked, "So, what do you think happens when we die?"

She shrugged. "Probably the same as everyone else."

"I don't know what that is. I haven't really talked to people about it."

“Well, of course, we know we go someplace. That’s pretty well established, from what we know from ghosts. We continue to survive in some form. The ghosts talk about a decision point, and some of them have said they caught a glimpse of what lies beyond. It sounds like what Muggles call heaven. Most people believe we go on to do something else, but not everyone agrees what. Why did you ask?”

“I guess, because I had my own experience, and the conversation made me think of it. What happened made me not afraid of dying anymore.”

“You’re Harry Potter,” she said teasingly. “I didn’t think you were afraid of anything.”

He smiled, but it quickly changed to a rueful expression. “Now that I have you, I’m definitely afraid of losing you.”

She patted his hand. “It won’t happen. I should worry about it more, with your job. But all we can do is live one day at a time.”

“Did anyone say that in your dream?”

She grinned. “I don’t remember, if they did. But, who knows.”

* * * * *

The next day seemed to pass slowly, with a feeling of foreboding, and it wasn’t until mid-afternoon that Harry had the thought that it was because no one had died yet; usually, Voldemort had at least one of his killings done before 1 p.m. Time slowly passed; nothing happened, or at least nothing important. He got a briefing from Kingsley about what information about Bellatrix Lestrange’s capture would be provided to the Prophet. Draco Malfoy asked him for a way to contact Kingsley if there was an emergency and Harry was on the other side at the time. There was a brief ceremony for the two Aurors who had died the day before; though many spoke, Harry didn’t, as he had barely known them. He felt bad that there was nothing he was able to say.

The switch would happen at about a quarter after eight in the evening. Harry found himself hoping that if killings did happen, they would happen before then, as it would be considered peculiar that there was an emergency and he was unavailable. He barely allowed himself to hope that the killings would simply not happen, period.

He thought about having dinner, then decided to eat on the island. The food might be simpler and less varied than that served by the Aurors' house-elves, but he found he liked it. Still nothing happened, and as the time approached, he returned to Grimmauld Place and lay down on the bed.

He ate at the table almost alone; most people had eaten on the other side, as dinnertime was usually between six and seven. Luna, who had already eaten, sat with him to keep him company. In the twilight, he looked out onto the field to see most of the trainees practicing magic together; it was interesting, he thought, that now the time on the island was so brief that most used it as the main chance to get together. Of course, they could on the other side, but security was a big issue, and training in such a big group would be conspicuous. Harry considered the possibility of opening up to them some of the training facilities of the Park. The Aurors might not like it, but he was after all the Auror Leader. If he deemed it desirable, they should accept it. He reminded himself to mention it to the other Kingsley.

To his Kingsley, he talked about how their counterparts were doing with the fact that they were spending most of their time on this side, isolated on an island, away from their lives. Kingsley said they were adapting surprisingly well, and many had taken up training voluntarily; partly out of an interest in becoming Aurors, and partly because, as George's counterpart had put it, there was little else to do. The other Ron and Hermione had made little secret of their unhappiness that nothing was being done for their Harry, and some others of their group had voiced agreement. Harry sympathized, but could still think of nothing to do. Going to Australia wasn't an option. He then remembered that Luna had dreamed of a boomerang; could that be a sign that they should go to Australia? Shaking his head, he dismissed the thought as absurd. This is probably why I don't remember my dreams, he thought wryly. As some Muggle once said, that way lies madness.

In his tent at a quarter to midnight, Harry lay down, looked up at the ceiling of the tent, and waited. I should put something up there to look at, he thought, I spend so much time lying here waiting for the switches. As his mind drifted to related thoughts, he suddenly heard a cheer come from outside; it had to be the sounds of at least five or six people. Wonder what that's all about, he thought, but he knew he shouldn't get up. He would find out at the next switch.

He was suddenly in his bed at Grimmauld Place, looking over to see Draco Malfoy sitting near his bed. He raised his eyebrows. "Malfoy?"

"There you are. I didn't wake you, did I? I didn't assume you'd be sleeping after the switch, even though it is late."

"No, not for a while," said Harry, sitting up. "What's going on?"

"Just something I wanted to talk to you about, and I happened to be up. How's the island, by the way?"

Harry shrugged; it was an odd question for Malfoy to ask. "Pretty nice; it never really changes. A little warmer, since it's in the Southern Hemisphere, so it's in the middle of summer there—"

A loud beeping sound came from the badge on his chest; he instantly wondered whether it had sounded before, and he hadn't been able to respond. "Leader Potter, Code red. Diagon Alley, in front of Quality Quidditch."

Was Voldemort trying to get in his kills before midnight? He shot up to a standing position and Disapparated.

He appeared in front of the shop, and looked at it for a second; it appeared to be closed, with nothing going on. "Harry, here," said Kingsley. Malfoy Apparated in as Harry turned around.

To his great surprise, he saw a three-foot-tall metallic object, with a wide, round base, which curved vertically to become a two-inch-wide pole. There was a circular hole near the top, into which a small metal bar had been inserted. "We've analyzed it, it's a Portkey," said

Kingsley. "One with a personal signature. You can make a Portkey that can recognize only one person, but you need a bit of the person to do it."

It didn't take Harry long to figure out where this had come from. "Voldemort? Why would he—"

As soon as Harry spoke, a high-pitched and very loud whistling sound, in three staccato bursts, was emitted from the stand. A foot above the stand, a miniature version of the Dark Mark suddenly appeared.

"Leader Potter," came Voldemort's voice, with a sneer when speaking the word 'Leader'. "We must meet to finish this matter, once and for all. You and only you will take the Portkey. Do bring your wand, of course. It would hardly be fair otherwise. If you need a further reason to come..."

In the air in front of the device, there was suddenly an image, about two feet wide. It showed Ron and Hermione in chairs, arms tied behind their backs... and Ron screaming hideously and writhing, no doubt under the Cruciatus Curse. Harry wondered if it could be a deceptive image, but then realized that they were wearing the same clothes he'd seen them wearing earlier. The Curse went off Ron, who slumped in his chair; now, Hermione was screaming in agony. The image disappeared after a few more seconds. Harry knew beyond any doubt that he'd be going, whatever the cost or consequences.

"A bell will sound at the end of this recording. If you come, they will not be killed. If you have not come within fifteen seconds after the bell sounds, the Portkey will deactivate, and they will be killed." There was a loud sound which did in fact sound very much like a large bell. The number '15' appeared in midair, changing quickly to '14', and counting down.

Harry turned to Malfoy. "Find Luna, tell her not to try to come, that it's the Aurors' job to find me and get me."

"You shouldn't go," Malfoy urged him.

Harry grunted. "Yeah, right."

Kingsley spoke. "TT is on."

"Don't come in close," Harry instructed him. "Check for fields." Kingsley opened his mouth to object, but Harry had grabbed the Portkey and vanished as the number '2' appeared.

Malfoy turned to Kingsley before the Auror could Disapparate. "You're not going to do what he said, are you?"

Kingsley gave Malfoy a wry glance. "It'll be a matter of interpretation," he said, and Disapparated.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 19, Repentance: In a showdown with Voldemort, Harry faces a trial similar to the Auror Leader test—but this time, for real.

From Chapter 19: "Now, Potter, you will take a vow of allegiance to me. An Unbreakable Vow, I should specify."

Harry chuckled darkly. "I don't think so." The situation was grim, but he knew he couldn't do it, no matter what.

Chapter 19

Repentance

Harry was in what looked like a one-room building, with bare walls that seemed to vibrate with magic—at least to his eyes; there were probably magically reinforced—and a hard wood floor. To his left were Hermione, still screaming in pain, and Ron, screaming in anguish for Hermione's torment. Voldemort moved his wand to focus on Harry, and Hermione now slumped over, exhausted. Harry could see their wands on a shelf behind Voldemort. He wanted to Summon them over to his friends, but their arms were well tied behind their backs, and he knew he couldn't do all the magic required without Voldemort stopping him cold. He accepted the fact that there was nothing he could do.

"Potter, thank you for coming," said Voldemort casually. "Oh, and I'm sorry that the Temporary Trace the Aurors no doubt put on you is now gone. I set the Portkey to eliminate all tracing spells or devices. I would not have called you here if I intended our time to be so short." Harry's heart sank; they were beyond help.

Voldemort flicked his wand, and Harry's flew out of his hand. He did a double-take, wondering how he'd been Disarmed so easily, then looked at the floor; there was a small field of magic under his feet. Harry assumed it made his magic less effective. He tried to move, but was held down, as if his shoes were glued to the floor. I guess that's the problem, he thought, of entering the room exactly where your adversary knows you will.

"Now, Potter, you will take a vow of allegiance to me. An Unbreakable Vow, I should specify."

Harry chuckled darkly. "I don't think so." The situation was grim, but he knew he couldn't do it, no matter what.

"I expected that answer, of course. I would force your obedience with the Curse, but I know that as Auror Leader, you can resist it. But I suspect that you will be open to another avenue of persuasion. Crucio!"

Hermione screamed and writhed again. Harry winced, in torment at the pain of his cherished friend, but he couldn't change his mind, even if he had to watch them be tortured into insanity. An Auror Leader beholden to an evil Dark wizard would wreak havoc on society. This is like a different version of the Auror Leader test, he thought. I have to watch my friends suffer, to do what's best for society. But how did he ever catch them? He must have caught their counterparts before the switch, but they would never be so careless...

"You bastard!" screamed Ron in fury over Hermione's screams. "Make it me instead!"

"How noble, Weasley. You are indeed a Gryffindor. But we always say, ladies first. Fear not, you will have your chance." Hermione continued to scream and writhe in the chair, which Harry thought must have been held down by magic, as Hermione's contortions didn't disturb its balance a bit.

"But I will do this for you, Weasley," Voldemort continued, raising his own voice slightly to be heard. "I will change from her to you... if you will urge your friend Potter to take the vow I demand."

Now Ron cringed, forced to put himself in Harry's place. Ron had to know, thought Harry, that Harry wouldn't do it for any reason, but Ron would still hesitate strongly to even appear to try to persuade Harry to do it.

Harry glared at Voldemort. "You really enjoy this? How diseased are you, that you can get pleasure from doing this?"

Voldemort didn't take his concentration off of Hermione as he answered. "It is not a disease, Potter. It is the purest expression of humanity: the desire for power. Early man desired power, as evolution urged him to do. Those who had power survived, and the will to power dominated humanity. That is who we are.

"Torture is an instrument of power," he continued. "If you agreed to my demands, there would be no more torture. You do not, so I use

the most efficient means at my disposal to attain my goals. They suffer because of you, not me.”

“You’re the one holding the wand,” Harry shot back.

“True, but you could stop it. That makes you responsible.”

“Why don’t you just kill me?” Harry dared him.

Voldemort tilted his head. “It may come to that,” he agreed. “But my power would be much enhanced with the Auror Leader as my vassal. So, I will see if you can be persuaded. I have time.”

* * * * *

Malfoy Apparated in front of what he knew was the Lovegood home, though there was nothing he could see. His wand emitted a sharp, loud whistle. “Luna!” he shouted at the top of his voice. “It’s urgent! Apparate out here, now!”

She did, and he was slightly taken aback to see her wearing pajamas; somehow, they made her look like a child. “What is it?”

“The Dark Lord’s got Harry,” he said quickly; shock came over her face. “He got Weasley and Granger, and told him he’d kill them unless he came. The Aurors did a Trace on him, but the Dark Lord had a Portkey that can get rid of that. They’re alone, and they’re going to die... unless you do something.”

“What?” she asked simply, her attention focused.

He handed her two largish tablets. “Swallow these. There’s a tracking device in there. You need to Apparate to his location.”

She took the tablets, but didn’t swallow them. “I can’t. I don’t know where he is.”

“You can. The necklaces you wear give the wearers the same type of magic as house-elves who can Apparate to their master’s location without knowing where it is. Just focus on ending up where he is, and

you will. But you need to know, the Dark Lord will have a anti-Disapparation field up.”

“Then how can I get past that?”

“One of the tablets has something that’ll help you, boost your power for a short time. Still, it’ll be difficult. You have to focus all your power, focus on getting past the field. Think about your feelings for him. You can do it if you try hard enough.”

She nodded, and swallowed the tablets. “After you’re there, I’ll go to Shackbolt. He’ll be able to trace you, but it may take them a few minutes to get to you.” His expression was extremely serious. “It won’t be fun.”

She would have thought she’d be afraid, but found she wasn’t. This was her chance to redeem herself, and if she suffered for it, that was the way it had to be. “I understand,” she said solemnly. She concentrated, eyes closed, and after ten seconds Disapparated.

Or, at least, most of her did. Her legs, from the upper thigh down, remained, while the rest was gone.

“Luna!” screamed Xenophilius, running out the door of his home, which was still invisible to Malfoy. “What happened—“

From a distance of ten meters, Malfoy aimed his wand and shot off a Stunning Spell. The old man was blasted a meter back, and hit the ground hard.

* * * * *

Harry was startled to see a little over half of Luna suddenly appear a few meters in front of him and to his right. Voldemort grinned, and stopped the Curse on Hermione. Oh, no, Harry thought in dread. Not this. The woman he loved would be tortured, probably slowly torn apart before his eyes. He remembered how the Dursleys had died. But his mind rebelled whenever he even began to contemplate agreeing to Voldemort’s demand.

“Well, Potter’s lover, even better,” gloated Voldemort, as he whisked her wand away with barely an effort. “Impressive, Lovegood, that you made it in this far. Even being Splinched, it is quite a feat.” She looked at him serenely.

“I have told your partner that he must take an Unbreakable Vow of allegiance to me. Do you know what will happen to you if he does not do so?”

She answered calmly. “Nothing I’ll like.”

Voldemort let out a dark chuckle. “You should have been a Gryffindor too. Humor in the face of torment and death. Admirable indeed. Where do you come by such poise?”

“I have sins to repent.”

“Ah, a martyr. Well, history is full of those, as well. You will get the Curse for a full five minutes, after which you will have a chance to repent your repentance. Any requests for your Leader?”

Gazing at Voldemort, she didn’t look at Harry. “He knows what he mustn’t do.”

“As you wish.” This time without the incantation, he pointed the wand at her, and the screaming began.

A few seconds later, to Harry’s shock, Malfoy was suddenly standing a few feet from Voldemort. Voldemort didn’t move, his eyes still on Luna, wand pointed at her as she flailed in agony, unable to fall to the floor, as her legs were elsewhere. “Malfoy!” screamed Harry. “Grab him!”

Malfoy grinned. “Why would I do that, Potter? I’m on his team now.”

“What??” Ron and Hermione also gaped in amazement.

“I told her she had to come,” explained Malfoy. “The Dark Lord needed a way to exert his will on you, after all. When this is all over, I intend to be on the winning team.”

Fury grew in Harry as he listened to his beloved scream. "I don't think you will be."

Malfoy smiled. "Oh, I will. You can be sure of that." Through his anger, Harry noticed that his senses didn't detect any falsehoods.

"Draco," said Voldemort. "Did all go according to plan?"

"Yes, my Lord. I told her that what I gave her was a tracking device."

"Well done, Draco. You see, Potter, I also instructed Draco to find your friend Shackbolt, and give him a false lead as to our whereabouts. They will be over an hour following that up. But we should not need that much time."

Harry had never felt so helpless in his life. He was beginning to feel that this was even worse than the Auror Leader test; at least that had been over quickly. This could drag out for hours, he thought. He glanced over at Malfoy, but couldn't stand to look at Malfoy's grin, reminding him of the betrayal he hadn't seen coming.

The seconds dragged by; it was the longest five minutes of his life. When Voldemort finally stopped, Luna gasped, catching her breath, struggling for air and balance.

"What do you have to say now, Lovegood?"

Dazed and still in pain, she looked over at Harry, and his heart almost broke on seeing how much she still loved him. "Please... don't blame yourself." He closed his eyes, unable to do anything else.

"Potter," said Voldemort, gazing at him intently. "Even as I torture her into insanity, will you still not change your mind?"

Harry wished he could surrender, but it just wasn't in him. "No, I won't change my mind."

Voldemort nodded. "I thought as much. I asked in order to check your answer via Legilimency, and you do not lie. You may change your

mind, of course, but if you have the stubbornness needed to become Auror Leader, you are not likely to do so. So, we will put it to the final test.”

He turned to Malfoy. “Draco, I told you before that you would be required to prove yourself, by ending a life. The time has come. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready, my Lord.”

“Have you chosen the method?”

“Yes.” He pointed the wand at Luna.

“Malfoy, don’t!” shrieked Hermione. “For her, and for you!”

Malfoy shook his head. “Too late, Granger. I’m doing what I have to do.”

Luna gasped and writhed. Harry didn’t know what was happening, but Malfoy explained. “I chose something that wasn’t instant, Potter, so you have more time to agree to the Dark Lord’s demand. Water is filling her lungs; she’s drowning on dry land.”

Malfoy kept his eyes on Luna, never looking at Harry. Water started to pour from Luna’s mouth and nose as she futilely gasped for breath. “She’s got about one minute, Potter. What’s it going to be?”

Harry struggled not to do anything or say anything. There was nothing he could do. Her words rang in his head: don’t blame yourself. He knew rationally that it was true, but when a word from him could save her life and he refused to give it, how could he not?

She slumped over, head forward, as water dripped out of her nose and mouth. She didn’t move or try to breathe. Harry remembered how he’d felt at the Auror Leader test; the feeling was devastatingly familiar. At least he would soon be following her. That was a comfort, though a small one.

* * * * *

She floated up to the ceiling, observing her own slack body and her tormented lover. She wanted to call out to him, to tell him that it would be all right, but she couldn't. He'd said he didn't fear death anymore; she hoped he could accept hers.

She saw the light, and it was as though gravity pulled her to it. She noticed a minor passage below, and knew that it was the escape path; follow it, and become a ghost. She had no desire to do that. The light was powerful, promising peace and relief.

Suddenly she was there, standing on an amorphous surface. Light was all around. From a few meters away—did distance even exist here?—she saw a very familiar face.

“Mother!”

The tall, striking blonde smiled beatifically. “Luna, darling. I have missed you.”

Luna ran to hug her, and they embraced. “I’m very glad to see you.”

“And I,” said her mother. “I’m sorry to have left you so early. It was my path.”

“I understand,” said Luna. “Is this where we go?”

“No. This is what could be called a staging area. The place beyond is filled with wonders, limited only by your imagination. I look forward to being with you again. But you must decide whether this is your time.”

Luna was surprised. “Didn’t I die?”

“As we speak—to the extent that time can be said to exist—you are dead. But the time beyond which you can be brought back has not yet passed. If you follow me now, that option is foreclosed. Events may foreclose it in any case, but for now, it is your decision.”

Luna thought, and a question occurred. “Mother... those dreams I had... did they mean what I thought they meant?”

Her mother raised an eyebrow in a way that suggested she wouldn't answer the question directly. "Listen to your dreams, my darling. If you learn to understand them, they will never guide you falsely."

"It is my fault that the dimension-switching started, isn't it?"

"It is not productive, my love, to think in terms of 'fault'. Your actions contained no malicious intent, and that is important. We all make mistakes. You must forgive yourself."

Luna nodded silently; her mother's words contained more impact than those of anyone who'd told her not to blame herself.

She thought of another question. "Are you my mother from this dimension, or the one I came from?"

Her mother gazed at her lovingly. "Both."

* * * * *

Voldemort pointed his wand at Harry. "I would have preferred you alive, but if this is the way it must be... at least, the prophecy will be fulfilled. Are you ready to die, Potter?"

He didn't want to say 'yes', but he was beyond caring. He had suffered enough. "You said you wouldn't kill Ron and Hermione if I came."

A short nod, as if acknowledging a minor point. "True. I keep my word; they will live. They will end up in St. Mungo's, keeping Longbottom's parents company." He saw his two friends share an alarmed glance.

Harry shook his head. Angrily, he said, "If there is a hell, like Muggle legends say, then you'll be running the place as soon as you get there."

As he spoke, Harry was vaguely aware of magical fields changing above their heads; indeed, above the ceiling. He glanced up, trying

not to be too obvious. He had, before, 'seen' magic beyond physical barriers, and he had seen enough to know that these were overlapping anti-Disapparation fields. The Aurors were here. Ironical, he thought, that even if they can get in, they won't be in time. Maybe they can save Ron and Hermione, at least. Maybe I can get them some time. But how? He's a second away from killing me.

"Voldemort! I want to know before I die. Why did you kill my parents?"

To Harry's surprise, Voldemort actually sighed lightly, and looked at Harry as if he'd expected better from him. "I will not be deterred by crude and obvious delaying tactics. Ask your parents to explain it to you in the great beyond; you should have plenty of time together." Voldemort raised his wand.

Harry suddenly saw other magic activate, and was stunned to see a Protection Shield go up around Luna's motionless half-body, still seeming to hover in midair. Who did that? Malfoy? What's the point?

As he was about to speak the words that would kill Harry, Voldemort noticed Harry's eyes, and he too glanced at Luna. From the look in Voldemort's eyes, Harry instantly realized that Voldemort too could see magic.

Malfoy had seen the look as well. To Harry's shock, Malfoy leaped at Voldemort, clearly hoping to swat away the wand. Malfoy had almost reached his target when a flick of Voldemort's wrist sent Malfoy flying the other way, planting him against the wall, a foot off the ground. Malfoy looked as if the wall was a surface holding him to it with gravity five or six times normal. He groaned as enormous pressure was put on his body.

Fire was in Voldemort's eyes. "No one has ever betrayed me as flagrantly as you have just done, Draco. Your death will be memorable... as painful as it will be slow." Malfoy struggled to breathe. "Lord Voldemort never forgets—"

The wall to Harry's right exploded with tremendous force, as if large amounts of Muggle explosives had been placed against it and set off. Wood and metal fragments went flying; a few pieces hit Harry as he

was thrown back, no longer glued to the floor by Voldemort's spell. Luna was hit by many pieces, including two large ones.

When the dust settled a few seconds later, Voldemort, who had been knocked back as well, stood and faced what was now an open wall. Looking through it for the first time, Harry saw a dozen Aurors in the distance—and closer, about five meters outside the wall, over a dozen people. Justin, Dean, Corner, Angelina, Neville, George...

"Now!" shouted Neville.

"OBLIViate!" they shouted as one. They fired, and Harry saw their spells meet at about a meter outside the wall, fall in together, and become one. The bright, powerful spell headed toward its target. Voldemort had the Protection Shield up, and put up a blocking spell, which would have been more than enough to block any spell by any wizard. But he had never seen this spell before.

The spell crashed through his block; to Harry's vision, it was as if a small shield fractured into a thousand pieces. It continued on, powering its way through the Protection Shield, and plastering Voldemort against the wall he had held Malfoy against only seconds earlier. Voldemort crumpled to the ground.

Aurors started in as Harry staggered to his feet, as did Malfoy. "Pull her out of the Splinch!" shouted Malfoy to the first Aurors to enter; they got busy doing so.

Neville also came in. "Nobody kill him! If he's hurt, make sure he doesn't die!"

Malfoy took another step toward the gaping hole in the wall. "Healers! Did the Healers come?" Three green-robed wizards and witches quickly approached the opening in the wall, careful not to step on the debris. They bent over Luna, whose whole body was now lying on the floor.

His grief registered more powerfully now that it was over. "What the hell's wrong with you, Malfoy?" he shrieked. "She's dead! You killed her!"

“She can still be saved!”

“It’s been too long!” a furious Harry shouted, trying to hold back the tears that suddenly threatened.

“It hasn’t! They can—“

“God damn you, Malfoy—“

Malfoy grabbed Harry’s shoulders; Harry resisted, but Malfoy’s grip was like iron. “Potter! Listen to me! Before this happened, I gave her a tablet that keeps oxygen going to the brain even if the heart stops. If they can revive her, she’ll be all right.” The rage went out of Harry; his body slackened. Please, he thought desperately, let it be true. At the same time, he felt he couldn’t dare hope.

Ron and Hermione walked over; Hermione regarded Malfoy. “You were on our side the whole time, weren’t you. You knew he might tell you to kill Luna, and you picked the drowning spell to buy time.”

Malfoy nodded. “That’s right. You always were fast, Granger.” He paused, and the worry in his eyes and in his voice was evident. “I just hope it was enough.”

Harry’s tone conveyed his feelings. “And if it wasn’t...”

Malfoy didn’t back down from Harry’s gaze. “Then I’ll have committed a murder, and nothing you can say will make me feel worse than I will already.”

Knowing that Malfoy’s words and feelings were genuine, Harry walked away, trying to look over the shoulders of the Healers without getting too close. He knew that they would say something when they knew, but it wasn’t a good sign that it was taking this long. He felt as if a heavy weight was pressing against his chest.

Hermione spoke again to Malfoy. “What I want to know is, how did Ron and I get captured in the first place? Did you tell some story to our counterparts, lure them to where they could get captured?”

Malfoy shook his head. "I told your counterparts the plan from top to bottom. They knew the risks to her, to Potter, to you, everything. They agreed to it, and set themselves up to be captured."

"What??" exclaimed an aghast Ron.

Harry was stunned as well. Walking back over, he demanded, "Why did you have to bring Luna into it?"

"It was the only way!" said Malfoy with emotion, raising his voice. "There was no other way to get a tracking device in here—"

"Then you shouldn't have done this—"

"Look over there, Potter!" Malfoy shouted, pointing at Voldemort, on the ground, surrounded by Aurors. "He's Obliviated for life, he's done! That means it was a good plan! Yes, there were risks. But you're Auror Leader, and that means you have to be willing to sacrifice anyone for the sake of—"

Rage boiled over in Harry again. "I don't need to hear from you what Auror Leader means—"

Ron stepped between them. "Harry," he said gently, pushing his friend back towards Hermione, who took him by the shoulder. "Let's just wait to see how it goes with Luna. Healers are with her. If she can be brought back, they will."

Having left Harry with Hermione, he turned to Malfoy. "Malfoy," he said, lowering his voice, "we get why you did this, and I can see you're worried too. But however good the results end up being, now is not the best time to be telling Harry what he has to sacrifice as Auror Leader. It's an awesome and horrible responsibility, and one that you and I, luckily, will never face."

Malfoy looked at Ron, and for the first time, there was respect in his eyes. He took a deep breath and nodded, saying nothing. He turned and looked in Luna's direction. "Come back, come back," he muttered.

A few seconds later, there was a loud gasp, followed by intense chatter from the Aurors as orders were given. Harry and the others moved closer; a Healer stood to face them. "We have managed to start her heart, and she is breathing again."

Malfoy and Harry both took deep breaths of relief. "It is too soon to know about brain damage, but if she took an oxygen supplier, there should be none." The man turned to Malfoy. "I assume you were the one who broke into our supply and stole some?"

Malfoy nodded. "It wasn't that hard."

"We will keep that in mind," said the man, with a wry look. "Was it also you who sent the Howler?"

Again, Malfoy nodded. To the others, he explained, "Just before coming back here, I went to St. Mungo's and let loose a Howler, telling them that they had to send specialists to Auror Headquarters, and prepare to revive someone who had drowned."

"We will be moving her to St. Mungo's shortly, as soon as she is stabilized," said the man. "Leader Potter, she is to you..." He trailed off.

Hermione answered. Gesturing to Harry's necklace, she said, "She's the one wearing the other half of this."

The Healer raised his eyebrows, understanding what it meant. "We will keep you informed of her condition, and let you know when we move her." He moved off.

Harry wandered away, moving toward the far wall, opposite the one that had been blown apart. He leaned against it, feeling emotionally exhausted, not knowing what to do or say.

Hermione approached. She faced him, reached out, and took him in her arms. Not quite knowing why—Luna would be all right, after all—he began sobbing into her shoulder. She held him tighter and rocked him lightly.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, at St. Mungo's, the Healers finally allowed him into the room to see her. He sat in the chair at the side of the bed and held her hand.

She gave him a weak smile. "I'm glad you're okay."

Surprised, he responded, "I should say the same thing about you."

"I know. But it was worse for you than it was for me."

He found he couldn't deny it. "Just a few minutes ago," he said, "I was out there thinking that I should break up with you and never have a wife or girlfriend in my life." He paused. "Then I came in here, saw your face... and I know I couldn't do that."

She gripped his hand in sympathy. "I can understand why you'd think that. But I hope you'll keep in mind that this isn't exactly going to be happening all the time."

"It better not. I don't think I could take it."

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "I know you wouldn't have wanted me to come. But I knew what Draco was doing, and that it was probably the only way to get Voldemort."

"You knew in advance?"

"No, not in advance. But when he pretended to be with Voldemort, even when he drowned me, I knew it was an act. I could just tell. I was a little surprised Voldemort couldn't."

"Well, I sure couldn't."

"That's more understandable," she said. A thought seemed to pop into her head; her eyes went wide. "Oh! I just remembered something from when I died." She paused to reflect. "Funny thing to say. But anyway... I talked to my mother, kind of like when you talked to

Dumbledore after you almost died that time. Not for long, but... I know what's going to happen with the switching."

"Really? What?"

"From what my mother said, I realized that my dreams were right. It's like an arc, or maybe we could say, an arch. The times the switches take start slow, pick up speed, then reach the maximum point at the top of the arc. At the top, we're here for almost all the time, and on the island for only a few seconds at a time. Then we start coming back down the arc again; we spend slightly more time on the island, then it picks up again, as we spend more and more time there..."

Harry found he understood. "So, the way it worked from the beginning of the switching until we're here almost all the time... after that, it's a mirror image of that. We spend more and more time on the island, until we're finally back there permanently."

"Exactly."

"How sure are you of this?"

He knew from her eyes before she said it. "I'm sure."

He smiled. "Good enough for me."

"So," she said, thinking, "Terry and Hermione will have to do the detailed calculations, but I'd guess that we'll reach the top of the arc in early March, then it'll reverse itself... and we'll be fully back on the island by August."

"Just in time to go back to England," he mused. "Some training."

"Well, they can train over here," she pointed out. "And with real Aurors, which won't be a bad thing."

"As long as nothing else bad happens."

"It won't," she assured him.

“Did your mother tell you that?” he teased her.

“No. I just have a feeling.”

The door opened, and Malfoy walked in. Harry glared at him. “I had a locking spell on that door.”

“Yeah,” said Malfoy offhandedly. “You need a better one.”

Annoyed, Harry exhaled. “Malfoy, we’re—“

“No, I want him to stay,” said Luna firmly. Harry silently surrendered as Malfoy conjured a chair and sat on Luna’s other side.

Malfoy took a deep breath, then spoke. “Luna... I’m very, very sorry that I had to do what I did. If there had been another way, I would have done it. I hope you know that.”

To Harry’s surprise, she reached out and took his hand. “I know. Please don’t feel bad, Draco. There are three people who aren’t going to die tomorrow because you did what you did.”

“I told myself that,” said Malfoy. “In a way, I knew it was right. More than anything else, I had to persuade the Dark Lord that I was on his side, and I had to pretend that I was happy to watch him torture you all. I tried to remember that. But when I had to do that to you...” Malfoy’s voice became noticeably heavier, and he gripped Luna’s hand a little harder. “It was all I could do to make myself do it. I tried to think of those three people. I knew I had done everything I could to increase the chances that you’d survive. But it was still tough. I’m just glad that you made it.” She nodded, and let go of his hand.

What Malfoy said made Harry recall something he’d forgotten. “You put a Protection Shield on her just before the explosion. How did you know it was going to happen then?”

“I saw you looking up,” Malfoy replied. “I realized that meant you were seeing the Aurors putting up their fields, which meant they would be in soon. I could guess which way they were coming, and I knew Luna would be in the path of the explosion. Without protection, she’d have

been ripped apart. I thought I could get away with doing it and not having the Dark Lord notice, but you kept looking at it, which made him look at it. I knew I'd been caught, so I jumped at him in desperation, on the off chance I'd catch him off guard."

Harry felt as though he'd been accused of tipping Voldemort off. "Well, it was just so bizarre, I couldn't imagine why anyone would put a spell on someone who was dead."

"I know," agreed Malfoy. "That kind of thing was part of the problem of you not knowing the plan. Of course, I couldn't tell you, or Weasley and Granger. It was crucial that you not know, so the Dark Lord couldn't force it out of you. Only I could know. You had to be persuaded I'd gone back to him."

"How could you know he wouldn't know you were lying to him? After all, he is a good Legilimens."

"I'm a good Occlumens."

"You were that sure you could fool him?"

"No. I thought I could, but I wasn't certain."

"And if he saw through you?"

Malfoy scoffed, as if it were obvious. "An extremely grisly death, of course. I mean, after what you've been through I wasn't going to dwell on it, but this wasn't without risks for me, either."

"Then why did you do that Protection Shield then? You put yourself in huge danger, knowing he could notice."

"Peer pressure," Malfoy half-joked. "You all were being so noble, so it must've rubbed off on me. But I also knew it had the effect of distracting him from killing you, so it worked in two ways. So, you know, it was worth almost getting my larynx crushed." Malfoy moved his neck around to humorously emphasize that he was still suffering from his admittedly mild injuries.

“Okay, so let me understand this,” said Harry. “You got the idea for this when he asked you to join him again?”

“Yes. And by the way, Potter, you absolutely should have as well. You failed miserably in this regard—“

“Listen, Malfoy—“

“No, you listen. You’re the Auror Leader, probably more brave and noble than anyone who’s come down the pike for the last hundred years. You can plan an operation and do it well, and you made the right decision yesterday, about Lestrage. You inspire people, and I can see why.

“But Potter, you have got to learn how to be devious, to be tricky. It’s not just a chess game, it’s also a mind game. There are levels within levels. When he invited me back, he had to know there was the possibility I’d try to trick him. I knew that he knew, and I planned for that. When I got that owl, the possibility of this plan was so obvious, it was staring me in the face. I couldn’t believe you didn’t see the opportunity it represented. Now, in a way that was good, because I could do this and you wouldn’t know, which was essential.”

“Why was it essential that I not know?”

“Because,” said Malfoy earnestly, “first of all, you’re a bad actor. You couldn’t have fooled the Dark Lord. Secondly, you wouldn’t have agreed to it. Weasley and Granger were the bait; it had to be them. He wouldn’t have agreed to the plan with anyone else, because no one else would guarantee that you’d come. Except Luna, and she couldn’t be the bait, because she was necessary later. Those necklaces... the plan couldn’t have worked without them. They made it possible for her to bring in a tracking device in a way that no one else could.”

“And almost got her killed,” pointed out Harry sternly.

Malfoy sighed. “I know. Look, Potter, I don’t know what to tell you. I told her that if there was another way I’d have done it, and I meant it. Every one of us—you, me, Weasley, Granger, and Luna—was at

very serious risk. I put together the plan as best I could, considered every contingency, maneuvered the Dark Lord into accepting it, or at least, the modifications I introduced. When I planned this I talked to Snape, who told me that the Dark Lord had been talking to him about this kind of plan. I proposed it to the Dark Lord knowing that, which made him more receptive to it.

“Anyway, the point is, it was a highly dangerous plan. I knew that. But I’d been thinking for weeks about possible plans, and come up empty. That owl yesterday was a huge opportunity, and I couldn’t let it slip by. This was the best I could do, and I knew it had a decent chance of success. You would sacrifice yourself to stop the Dark Lord; I know that, because you did it before, in your dimension. I didn’t doubt for a second that Weasley, Granger, or Luna would do the same. This dimension’s Weasley and Granger agreed to it, knowing they and their counterparts might well die. So, then... tell me why what I did was so morally wrong.”

Harry said what he thought, knowing it was an inadequate argument. “I would risk myself, but not them.”

Malfoy had the correct response. “But you don’t get to make that decision for them. Sorry, Potter, you know I’m right. I get why you hate it, and I know what it put you through—”

“No, you don’t,” Harry responded hotly. “Not until you’ve watched the woman you love die before your eyes do you know what I’ve been through.”

Sighing lightly, Malfoy looked down, not meeting Harry’s eyes. “I meant I understood it intellectually, in the abstract. I’ll concede the point, and maybe I shouldn’t expect you to not see it emotionally right this minute. But the plan was good, and it worked. You have to concede that.”

For the first time in a short while, Luna spoke. “He’s right, Harry,” she said sympathetically. “Ron and Hermione—okay, the other ones, but it’s still them—heard the plan and thought it was good enough to volunteer. I suspect that our Ron and Hermione would have agreed, but Draco couldn’t tell them, because they had to not know when

Voldemort was holding them. You went voluntarily, knowing you could very well die, just to save them, not even knowing about the plan. I went to save you; I also realized there was a plan, though I didn't know the details. The point is, we all went voluntarily, and Draco told people the plan to the extent that he could. It really does seem like the kind of thing that you might have to do as Auror Leader in the future. You might have to put people's lives at risk. Those people might not know the plan, but you know that they're willing to sacrifice their lives if they have to. Those people have loved ones, like you and I have each other. It's the price of being an Auror, of protecting society.

"I think you're arguing with Draco because as you said, you watched me die, and that's traumatic. You watched your parents die in the Auror Leader test, and you were super-angry at Kingsley, even though later you understood his actions. It's an emotional reaction, and I'm sure Draco wouldn't begrudge you that. But I think you're also angry with him because he was the one that did it, it was at his wandpoint that it happened. You have to remember that he didn't want to. Voldemort was in control of that situation, and he was responsible, no matter whose wand it came from. You have to understand that, and accept that in your heart. You might not be able to immediately, but I hope you will."

A confusing mass of emotions swirled around in Harry's head. He thought he could never forgive Malfoy, but here was the woman he had almost killed, doing so. Not knowing what to say, he looked down.

Malfoy spoke again. "Potter... first of all, none of this conversation, except for the details of the plan, is to be repeated to anyone. I'm talking like this because I respect you, and it's understandable that you're angry. It's not exactly the same, but if, say, you had done a plan like this, and my mother was in Luna's position, I'd be furious.

"Everything Luna said was right. I just want you to know that I did everything I could to minimize the risk to her. I was hoping he'd ask me to do it, because the drowning gave her the best chance to live. I was afraid he'd just decide to do it himself, in which case I was planning to ask him, to plead to be allowed to do it. There was also the risk that the Aurors might take too long, and she'd actually die. To

be honest, I was pretty scared of that. I got into this situation because I didn't want to kill Dumbledore. The last thing I wanted to do was to kill her."

"I know," said Luna gently. With a glance at Harry, she added, "Harry does too. He just needs some time."

Malfoy nodded. "Yeah. Well, I should get going." He stood, and looked down at Luna. "I mainly just wanted to see how you were doing, and say what I said when I came in."

She reached out to take his hand one more time. "You did good."

There was a rare vulnerability in Malfoy's eyes. "It means a lot to hear you say that. Thank you." He gave her a last look, glanced at Harry, then turned and left.

Neither spoke for a minute. Finally, Harry said, "I'm not sure I'd be as forgiving as you if I were in your position."

"I can't know," she replied, "but I think you would be. All I know is that it looks different from my position."

"Why did you say you had sins?" he asked.

"You know the answer to that," she said gently. "We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me, my carelessness. You don't want to admit that, but it's true."

"That doesn't mean you deserve to suffer."

"It does mean that if anyone's going to suffer, I'm a good candidate. But I think that you suffered more than me."

After another silence, he said, "I wonder what would have happened in this dimension. I mean, Malfoy decides not to kill Dumbledore, but the switching doesn't happen."

"Interesting question," she agreed. "I'm sure there's another dimension in which that happened."

He was surprised. "How many dimensions are there, then?"

"At first, I thought, only two," she said. "My mother taught me about the 'twin dimension', which was how she understood it. But now I'm pretty sure there are infinite dimensions, but we have one spirit, and all these different versions of us are... part of the same spirit. On the other side, I asked my mother if she was my mother or the other Luna's, and she said, both. So now, I think the spirit is... I guess we could say, multidimensional."

He shook his head. "It's a bit much. Or, as the Muggles say, it doesn't compute."

She smiled. "I know. We have a lifetime to work it out."

He met her eyes, but he still couldn't smile yet. I just hope, he thought fervently, that we get that lifetime, all of it. I'm not afraid of what's beyond... but as long as I'm here, might as well get the most out of this life as I can. And one of them is spending years with this amazing person I'm looking at. She smiled again, and he wondered if she had somehow known what he was thinking.

The door opened again, and this time it was Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny. They all said hello to Luna, and Hermione walked over to Harry. "I need you to stand up."

"What for?" asked Harry as he stood.

She pulled him into a hug. "I think you need another one of these."

Finally, the corners of his mouth turned a little upwards as he hugged her tightly. She kissed him on the cheek, then released him. Standing behind her, Ron then hugged him as well. "I'll skip the kiss on the cheek, though," joked Ron, slapping Harry on the shoulder instead. Again, Harry couldn't help but smile a little. Neville and Ginny then took their turns.

“We met Malfoy outside,” said Ron, “and talked to him for a minute. He said, ‘Potter’s going to be a while getting over this.’ We knew that, of course. I’m still surprised that our counterparts agreed to this.”

“I’m not, in a way,” said Hermione. “I mean, you have to give this to Malfoy, it was a good plan. Knowing the whole thing in advance, I could imagine agreeing to it. It was a gamble, but the odds weren’t going to get any better. I would feel terrible knowing what it might cost Harry, of course, but we all know that you have to take risks to do the right thing. Quite a few people now won’t die who otherwise would have.”

“Weird to think of Malfoy saving lives,” said Ron, shaking his head. “Of course, he got into this first to save his own skin.”

Luna told them what Malfoy had said about peer pressure. “He was joking, but I do think that being around people makes them rub off on you. There’s a certain... integrity, a good feeling in knowing that you did something to help people, that you saved lives. I think that Draco understands that now.”

“I was surprised,” said Ron, looking at Ginny and Neville, “that so many of you had the group spell. I’d only heard that it was five or six. Is it everybody now?”

Neville nodded. “Almost. Cho hasn’t been practicing it with us, and at first, not everyone was. But when six of us got it, that energized most everyone else to join, to start trying. Over the last few days, more people started getting it, and just before the switch—wow, it was just over an hour ago—was the first time we all had it, all the trainees. Just in time, apparently.”

“The Aurors didn’t think we’d be able to blast through that wall,” added Neville. “Voldemort had secured it well with stationary magic; they thought it would take at least twenty minutes to magically dismantle, but they agreed to let us try. I talked to a few of them afterwards, and they were pretty shocked. They’re going to be wanting to learn that.”

“I never thought of Obliviating him,” said Ron. “That was a good idea.”

“Kingsley told us it was Malfoy’s idea,” said Neville. “He said Malfoy gave him a note with details of the plan. Apparently Malfoy somehow knew that a lot of us had the group spell, and he had somebody—I’m not sure who—use the Galleons to get us together with the Aurors.”

Ron nodded, impressed. “He thought of everything.”

Harry understood, and was also impressed, despite himself. It had been important not to kill Voldemort because two Horcruxes still existed, including the one in the other Harry. Obliviating him guaranteed that he would live, but remain harmless forever.

“So,” said Ginny, “Voldemort’s going to end up like Professor Lockhart now?”

Neville nodded. “Even more so. The Aurors checked him; he’s pretty much a blank slate. They’re not sure he even knows how to speak. Of course, there’s never existed such a powerful Memory Charm. They think it may have utterly erased everything he knows or ever knew. The Aurors are holding him in maximum security. They know his memory isn’t going to come back, but they’re not taking any chances.”

“So... that’s it,” said Ron, as if just realizing it. “We won.”

“Yes, we did,” said Harry, whose tone indicated that he was far from happy in spite of the triumph.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. “We should get going,” she said. “We just wanted to come by and say hello. Luna, I assume you’ll be out of here by tomorrow?”

“I think so. Really, I could leave now, but you know how Healers are. I’ll be lucky if they let me out tomorrow. Thank you all for coming by. We should have dinner together soon, the six of us, like we did before we went to the island.”

“I’d like that,” agreed Neville. They agreed to do it soon, and the other four left.

Harry and Luna were alone in the silence, and Harry found he could hear the others speaking outside the door. "You were right," said Ron.

"About what?" asked Ginny.

Hermione answered. "The Aurors told Ron and me that they were having a... I don't want to say party, more like, informal celebration, now that we have Voldemort. They told us to let Harry know, if it seemed like he could be up for it, though they knew that he probably wouldn't be."

"I hoped he could do it," said Ron, "because he deserves to celebrate, and I know they'd like to have him there. Hermione said he'd never be in the mood to, and of course she was right. I guess what he needs right now is to just be with her."

Harry turned to her and took her hand again, looking into her eyes, which sparkled with humor. "I suppose he's right," she said.

"Who?"

"Ron. That we need to be together."

His eyebrows went high. "How did you hear him?"

"Through you." He just looked at her. "Didn't you know? The necklaces. We can look through each other's eyes, and hear through each other's ears."

"We can? How?"

She shrugged. "You... just have to listen a certain way. It's difficult to explain. Sorry, I thought you knew for some reason."

"Well... it was nice of them, but celebrating isn't anything I want to do right now. Like you said, and they said, being with you is the best thing."

“Until the St. Mungo’s people come and throw you out, saying I need my sleep,” she joked.

He grunted. “If they do, I’ll tell them I’m not leaving. If they don’t like it, they can try to have the Aurors throw me out. See how that works.”

She grinned. “I guess there are advantages to being Auror Leader.”

“That would be one advantage I would actually find useful.”

He was starting to feel a little better. After a few minutes, Harry could hear a small disturbance outside, and down the hall a fair distance.

“Please calm down, sir.”

“Calm down?” The voice was unmistakably that of Xenophilius Lovegood. “I’ll calm down when I see that Malfoy boy up on charges! He comes to our home, is so loud he could wake up the dead, calls my daughter outside. I go to the front door, and I see she’s Splinched! Only her legs! I go out to help her, and he Stuns me! I’ll have his head!”

“We have to check you out, Mr. Lovegood. It seems like you’ll be all right, but we want to be sure.”

“He sounds fine,” said another voice sardonically.

“Did they get my Luna out of that Splinch?”

“Uh... yes, sir, they did. Your daughter’s fine.”

“Good, good,” Xenophilius said, calming down. “But I will have words with that boy’s father. He is a bad element!”

Harry looked at Luna; they exchanged a wry glance. He knew what they were both thinking: if he was that angry at being Stunned, imagine his reaction when told that Malfoy had filled his daughter’s lungs with water.

“I wish Draco hadn’t done that,” she said unhappily.

He raised his eyebrows slightly. "You can forgive what Malfoy did to you, but you're not happy about—"

"I know," she said, her tone implicitly conceding Harry's point. "But my father didn't know what he was getting into," she pointed out. "I did."

"Well," Harry pointed out. "If Malfoy hadn't Stunned him, your father might have found someone to try to pull you out by your legs, and—"

"I know, I know," she reluctantly agreed. "I wasn't saying that you didn't have a reason to feel how you felt, you know. Just that Draco had to do what he did."

Harry nodded, ever so slightly. Maybe he did, he thought. But even if he did, it's not something I can bring myself to say. Or think.

* * * * *

Harry ended up conjuring himself a bed and sleeping in the hospital with Luna all night, and did in fact refuse to leave when ordered to do so by the Healers. He wasn't able to sleep well, but did get about three hours, which would be enough to see him through the next day; the switch would be at 10:00 p.m. the next evening.

The next morning's Prophet had the headline and basic story of the last night's events, but not details about what had happened inside the structure. That story would have to be told today, for the next day's Prophet. Harry called a meeting of all Aurors for 11:00 a.m. He considered making it earlier, but realized that some Aurors had drunk in celebration the night before.

He faced them all in the lounge; some were sitting, others standing. "First of all, I want to thank you all. For your efforts yesterday, and in general since I took over as Leader. It hasn't been easy. At least, now things should be getting back to normal.

"And with that in mind, there's something I need to tell all of you. Only a few people know, and for the time being, I'd like it to stay in this room. I am the Auror Leader, as my forehead will attest; I took and

passed the Leader test. But the circumstances were... highly unusual.” He took about ten minutes to tell them the story of the dimensional switching, why they were on the island, what had happened to this dimension’s Harry, and how he’d become persuaded that he should take on the role of Auror Leader in this dimension. The Aurors listened silently and attentively.

“So,” he concluded, “I feel like I’ve misled you all. In some ways, my not being from this dimension could be seen as a technicality. It’s still me, the same person, just with different memories. I suspect my counterpart would pass the test if he took it, though some random elements would be different.

“But in some ways, it might not be considered a technicality. I could have told you all this from the start, but I didn’t. I thought the emergency justified it. I don’t know if that was the best decision or not, but it was the one I made. The point is that in one sense, I’m not really the Auror Leader, or at least, not yours. Now that the emergency is over, there’s no more reason to hide anything.

“After I finish talking, I want to leave the room for a while, go back to my home. I want you all to talk about it. If there’s wide sentiment that I shouldn’t be Leader here, then I’ll give up that role, and probably explain it to the media. If it’s thought that I should stay Leader, then I will, at least for as long as I’m in this dimension, however long that is. Anyway, I’ll go now. Come get me when you’re ready.” He Disappeared.

At Grimmauld Place, he read the mail that was starting to pour in congratulating him; he wondered if Malfoy was getting mail as well. He was annoyed that St. Mungo’s hadn’t seen fit to release Luna yet, even though she’d said she felt fine in the morning.

After twenty minutes, Kingsley Apparated in. “You can come back.”

Back in the lounge, Mel stood. “I designated myself as the spokesperson. I’ll try to give you the sense of the conversation we had after you left.

“When we found out that you’d become Leader, we were, not to put too fine a point on it, shocked. You’re way too young, or at least, that would be the conventional sense.

“But over the past few weeks, we’ve gotten a new perspective on what leadership is. It has nothing to do with age, or bureaucracy, or even experience. It’s when you know you can follow this person because he does the right thing, because you know he would die for you if it came to that. It’s the root, the essence, of a person. Since you took over, we’ve seen you work hard, take your responsibilities seriously, and use good judgment. The fact that you’re not from this dimension, and may well get back to yours, only makes it more impressive: you could have just decided it wasn’t your fight—you’d done this already—and sat it out. But you didn’t; you geared up for the fight again, and almost gave up everything you had for it. Well, if that isn’t a Leader we can follow, then I don’t know what is. So the answer is that we consider you the Auror Leader for as long as you’re in this dimension. If you stay, then it’s for life. If you get back, then we hope your counterpart takes the test. That is our unanimous answer.”

Harry choked up, and struggled to push down the emotion he felt. A joke popped into his head, and he decided to go with it. “Unanimous?” he deadpanned. “Is Hedghorn not here?”

This got a big laugh, as many heads turned in Hedghorn’s direction. Hedghorn stretched his arms above his head. “Sorry, Potter, I’ve been napping for a while. What’s been going on?” There was more laughing, and a few good-natured insults thrown in Hedghorn’s direction.

Now loosened up, Harry felt he could say what he wanted to say. “Seriously, thank you all very much. It means a lot to me. Now, is there anything anyone wants to say before we break here?”

Kingsley spoke. “About the Prophet today... some of us were thinking that when talking about what happened yesterday, it’d be better if we said publicly that it was Voldemort who drowned Luna, not Malfoy, and tell the rest of the story exactly as it happened. Voldemort did order it, and Malfoy wasn’t in a position to refuse, but that’s a detail

that'll fly over a lot of people's heads. He might be seen as a murderer, unfairly, for the rest of his life. What do you think?"

While he hadn't made his peace completely with what Malfoy had done, this was to him a separate issue. "That's fine with me, but I'd like you to go talk to Malfoy, make sure he's on board."

"I already did," said Kingsley. "His attitude was, whatever. He did say that he didn't want that done if anyone who was in that room had the slightest reservation about it. I got the sense that he didn't want to shirk his responsibility."

Harry shook his head. "I'm okay, and I suspect Ron, Hermione, and Luna will be too. I'll talk to them."

"I've done that too," said Kingsley. "You're right, they have no problem with it. I'll go talk to the Prophet as soon as we're done here. They said they're sending Skeeter."

"Oh, good," said Harry sarcastically, again drawing laughs. "Well, no job is perfect." The meeting broke up, and he chatted with some Aurors in ones and twos. For the first time since working with these Aurors, he felt as though he truly belonged. It was a very good feeling.

* * * * *

Later in the afternoon, around three o'clock, Harry was relaxing on the sofa at Grimmauld Place. The fireplace lit up, and to Harry's surprise, it was Malfoy, who walked toward him, holding a piece of paper. "What the hell, Potter?"

Harry's eyebrows went up. "Nice to see you too, Malfoy."

Annoyed, Malfoy read from the paper in his hand. "Draco's plan was amazing, far better than anything I could have come up with. His life was on the knife's edge of danger, and his performance was excellent; he completely fooled You-Know-Who, not to mention the rest of us. He's primarily responsible for saving the lives of those who might have been killed in the future, and he's earned the greatest respect of all of wizarding society. He completely deserves to be

awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class.” Malfoy put down the paper and glared at Harry accusingly.

Bewildered at Malfoy’s attitude, Harry decided to go with sarcasm. “Well, yes, I admit it sounds insulting when you read it that way, but—
“

“Very funny. Why did you have to say all that crap?”

“You know, Malfoy, I never would have thought I’d have to say you were gullible, but now I do. This is Skeeter, remember?”

“So, you didn’t say any of that?”

Harry sighed. “Some of it. I definitely didn’t say it in one long sentence like that. A lot of this was stuff I said in response to three or four different questions, which were leading questions designed to get me to say good stuff about you. I said... let me see that.” He took the paper from Malfoy. “I said your life was in danger, but I never used the phrase ‘knife’s edge.’ That’s one of her embellishments. I think I said your acting was good, and she changed it to ‘performance was excellent.’ Then...” He looked again, and rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, Malfoy! Do you really think I said ‘You-Know-Who?’ Give me a break!”

“Okay,” admitted Malfoy. “I should have caught that one.”

“You bet you should’ve. The Aurors make jokes about how annoyed I get when anyone says that. Let’s see... primarily responsible for saving lives, I did say that. Hey, it was your plan, it was true. I said you deserved respect, didn’t say ‘greatest.’ About the Merlin First, she asked if I thought you deserved it; I said, sure, some people get it for a lot less good reasons. Somehow that became ‘completely deserves.’ You get the idea.”

“Bitch,” muttered Malfoy.

Harry still didn’t understand. “Yeah, she raked you over the coals, all right—“

"It isn't funny, Potter!"

"Well, what's your problem?"

"You really don't get it, do you?"

"Not until you explain it to me, no."

Malfoy took another piece of paper from his pocket. "They gave me a current draft of her article, and it's all like that. It's bullshit! I'm not this person she seems to want to create!"

"I found that out in fourth year, if you'll recall. Not to mention, I got canonized when I was announced as Auror Leader. But why does it bother you so much? Most people would be happy."

Malfoy finally sat, on a chair opposite the sofa. "If I have to spell it out for you... you were very unhappy with what I did, what I had to do, when we talked last night at St. Mungo's. As it turns out, I'm pretty unhappy with it too. For you, emotionally, it was as if I'd killed her. Well, for me, it was too. I didn't sleep at all last night. I feel like I killed her. I think I feel like I would feel if I had actually done it. I know I shouldn't feel that way, she said I shouldn't, but I do anyway. I figured that would just go away after a while, and it probably will. But it makes it twice as hard when she writes crap like this."

Harry sat back on the sofa and looked up, a little over Malfoy's head. It seemed ironic that he and Malfoy were both suffering the aftereffects of Luna's near-death, just in different ways. He knew that Malfoy wasn't as responsible as he felt, but Harry also knew that even if he felt he could say that, it wasn't what Malfoy needed to hear.

"Yeah, I can see that," Harry finally said. "No question about it, Skeeter's annoying as hell. Normally, you'd have no choice but to let yourself become her flavor of the month. But you have an advantage that other people don't."

Dubiously, Malfoy responded, "And what's that?"

Harry shrugged, as if it were obvious. “Tell her that you’d like the article to be balanced, not to make you look like a hero. And... imply that if you’re not allowed to see and approve the article before it’s published, it could become public knowledge that—“

“Animagus!” Clearly annoyed with himself, Malfoy banged the arm of the chair he was sitting in. “Idiot! Why didn’t I think of that?”

“The older Auror Leaders often warned the future ones about this. ‘Emotion gets in the way of rational judgment,’ I think is what they said.”

Malfoy grunted. “That observation is probably as old as human history, but I suppose, no less valid. Good idea, but I’d rather not have to do it myself. She’ll try to flatter me, I might have to get nasty with her... might end up bad. I don’t want to alienate her, either. She’s powerful.”

Harry wondered why Malfoy didn’t see what he was about to say, and again, decided it had to be his feelings clouding his judgment. “Invite her to the Manor for the interview. You’re upstairs; your father and Mr. Blackstone greet her, and sit down with her. They explain what you want, and make the threat, tell her she should follow the lead from your tone—“

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. But then I have to tell them how I feel, which I haven’t done yet.”

“I think they’ll understand,” said Harry.

“Yeah. Guess so. Okay. Hey, listen, can I get a memory from you, everything you said to her? I want them to be able to say, this is what Potter said, and this is what you wrote...” He conjured a glass cylinder to hold the memory Harry would give him.

“Sure,” agreed Harry, putting the wand to his head and extracting the silvery thread, which he deposited into the cylinder. “She’ll have to make someone else the hero now, though. Probably Luna.”

“She’s pretty even-keeled,” said Malfoy. “She can handle it.”

Harry knew Malfoy was right, though he also knew that Luna would have her own reasons for not wanting to be considered a hero. "Knowing her, she won't even be angry at Skeeter."

"No, she's not the angry type," agreed Malfoy. "Okay, thanks, Potter," he said casually, and left through the fireplace. Only now did it consciously occur to Harry that most of his anger at Malfoy had dissipated since the night before.

* * * * *

Back on the island that night, the first hour was spent celebrating Voldemort's defeat. While he still wasn't of a state of mind to celebrate with abandon, Harry was improved enough over the night before to at least be present for the party, Luna at his side. He thanked them for their role in rescuing them, and talked to them about the group spell. He tried to spend some time talking to each person individually; being with the other side's Aurors had given him a better sense of the kind of feeling and camaraderie he hoped for in his side's Aurors. At the end of the gathering, he told them that within the next week they would begin training at the Park, and he would be asking experienced Aurors to work with them.

Afterwards, Harry and Luna went back to Harry's tent. Inside, they had a long hug. Then he kissed her; first a short kiss, then a longer one. They looked into each other's eyes. Suddenly he knew, and he knew that she knew. She had said that they would know when the time was right.

The time was right. Without a word, they headed for the bed.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 20, Back to the Island: Harry faces the prospect of doing to his counterpart what infuriated him when it was done to him. (This will be the last chapter.)

From Chapter 20: He would send Kingsley to Australia again, and he would make inquiries again through Foster. He left the other Ron and

Hermione a Pensieve message to this effect, and got no reply. It appeared to him that they were washing their hands of it. It was his problem now.

Chapter 20

Back to the Island

"This was a good idea," said Ron, as he walked back from the table, ale in hand, and took his seat between Harry and Hermione.

"I thought so," agreed Harry.

It was a chilly but clear March evening, and seventeen young people were standing or sitting in what amounted to a large picnic area in the Park, the headquarters and training area for the Aurors. This particular section was sometimes used for outdoor social occasions; there were a dozen trees of various types, flowers, well-trimmed bushes, and grass. There were tables, lawn chairs, and benches, as well as one main table which contained the food, drinks, and silverware. The meal had been catered at a cost of two hundred Galleons, which was quite expensive, but Harry decided that he would pay for it. He earned a good salary as Auror Leader, and he needn't dip into the other Harry's savings if he used his own money.

It had been almost two months since Voldemort's defeat, and the time spent on the island had become ever smaller, almost vanishing; the last switch had been five days ago, and had lasted for only one second. From a scientific point of view, Hermione and Terry weren't sure what would happen tonight, though they were fairly sure something would happen. From an unscientific point of view, Luna's impressions from her dreams were well-known among the trainees; if she was right, tonight's switch would be longer than one second, signaling that the pattern of the switching was reversing itself. Everyone who had been switching for the past five months was present tonight to see what would happen. Harry had thought they should discover their fate together, and while they were at it, why not live it up a little?

"So, explain this to me again," said Ron to Hermione.

"I've explained this a few times," she pointed out.

He shrugged. "Yeah, but I wasn't listening."

She stared at him impassively. "So, you really think that's funny?"

"Not in a way that makes you laugh, but yes, a little. I do it partly to amuse Harry."

Harry nodded. "It's true. It does amuse me."

She rolled her eyes. "You two can be very annoying."

Luna came over, used her wand to increase the width of Harry's lawn chair as he sat in it, then took a seat next to him. "I don't think Harry and Ron will be doing that to me." Harry nodded his agreement.

"Why not?" asked Hermione.

Harry answered. "She wouldn't care. It wouldn't bother her."

Hermione grinned at Luna. "Well, then, I envy your composure."

"Thank you. Anyway, could you tell me? I haven't heard it yet."

Now that there was someone who genuinely wanted to hear, it seemed to Harry that Hermione was happy for the chance to explain it. "You probably know that there are three possibilities. One is that we end up staying on this side permanently; if that's the case, the switch will be very short, just a fraction of a second, maybe as little as a tenth of a second. If that happens, we can pretty much say goodbye to that side. It could happen that there just isn't a switch, in which case Terry and I have made a mistake in our assumptions, and we still don't know what's going to happen. Or, if you're right, the switch will be longer than a second, and we'll know we're heading back."

"Or," said Ron, "embarking on an endless cycle of switching, going slowly back and forth between dimensions all our lives."

She gave him a sour look. "Now you're just trying to annoy me."

"What, isn't it possible?" he asked innocently.

"Don't worry," Luna said to Hermione confidently, "that isn't going to happen. If it was, I would have had different dreams."

Ron leaned over to Luna, and said in a stage whisper, "I don't think Hermione believes what's in your dreams."

Harry chuckled; Hermione gave Ron a look that suggested that he was wearing out her patience. "That's not true, and you know that," she protested. "Prophetic dreams are a well-established phenomenon. All I've said is that it isn't science, which is different from saying it's wrong."

"Now, for the important question," said Ron. "Hermione and I have talked about this, but I haven't asked you. Do you have a preference? I mean, for you, Harry, I'm not sure that this side is so much worse than the other, right?"

"Strictly speaking, no," he agreed. "I have you two, Luna, and my friends. Remus and Tonks are alive over here. It wouldn't be so bad. But of course, as we've talked about, there are no Aurors over there. They would end up going back to England in a very different situation, and most importantly, without an Auror Leader, but someone who needs a Horcrux taken out of his head."

In the past two months, Harry had been brought out of his coma twice in order to see if the Horcrux had migrated back to its former place, or if its effects had waned. He was in as much pain as he had been before, and was put back into the coma. The best, or only, suggestion as to its removal had come from a specialist in Dark magic (sworn to secrecy about the inquiry, and not knowing the name of the person who had the Horcrux) whose idea was to project a form of deadly magic into the specific area where the Horcrux was. The man was unsure whether it would work, or whether the patient would even survive the procedure; it was simply the best idea the specialist could come up with. This was conveyed to the other Ron and Hermione, who naturally rejected the plan.

"That makes sense," she agreed. "For me, in a way, this side is a little better, since I have a chance to deal with my parents in a better way than I did last time; they wouldn't have to find out from a reporter. I

suppose any feelings I have are that in a general sense, we should go back where we came from. It just feels right. You think the same thing, right, Ron?"

"Yes, it just seems like we should. I can't say one is better than the other, since I lost a family member on each side. I suppose George would have a preference, though."

From three meters away came a shout of, "I heard that!" George disengaged from Lee and Corner, and walked over.

"Good ears," commented Ron.

George motioned to his mutilated ear. "This one, not so good. It must have been pointing away. But I did hear my name. So, what were you saying about me behind my back?"

Ron explained it; George shrugged lightly. "Of course, it wouldn't be terrible if we ended up here, since as you no doubt mean, I get Fred back. But of course we lose Dad, so as you said, there's a balance. If I could choose, I'd choose to go back, as staying would mean that the other George would lose his Fred. Wouldn't be fair, as I do believe him to be a good bloke."

Harry smiled. "I'm sure he is." George nodded and headed back to his previous conversation.

Ron looked at Harry. "Nothing you'd miss from this side if we go back? I mean, there's your good friend Malfoy, for example."

Chuckling, Harry thought about it. "It'd be hard to classify that. I suppose we are friends, in a way. We went through stuff together that brings you closer to somebody."

"Except when they almost kill the person you love," pointed out Ron. Harry gathered that Ron was curious about Harry's current feelings about the topic.

"Like we talked about at the time, there's the rational and the emotional. Rationally, I'm okay with what he did, mainly because I

know you would have approved if you'd known the whole thing," he said, glancing at Luna. "But emotionally... I try, but there's a Muggle saying, 'you can't un-ring a bell.'"

"The spell doesn't return to the wand," said Luna; Harry realized that she was contributing the wizarding equivalent.

"So—Luna and I have talked about this many times, of course—it's hard for me to completely put it out of my mind. I'd say I'm 99% past it, but it's hard to say if that other 1% would ever go away. I know I should get past it, and Luna hopes I will, but..."

"Human nature," agreed Hermione. "If it had been Ron instead of Luna, I could see myself feeling the same way. But I'm wondering, Harry, putting that aside—suppose it had happened differently—do you think you and he could be considered friends?"

Good question, thought Harry. "That would have helped, but I'm not sure that makes it so different. The difference is mainly in my mind, and I try not to let it spill over into dealing with him. As you know, we've had him over for dinner a few times, and we went to Malfoy Manor for dinner a month ago, so if we stayed, I'm sure there'd always be some relationship. Maybe like an old Army friend, someone who wasn't your favorite type of person, but you got to know and respect from working together. I suspect he probably sees it the same way."

"Does he see Crabbe and Goyle anymore?" asked Ron.

"Goyle yes, Crabbe no," said Harry. "Crabbe trying to trick him into being captured by Voldemort is something Malfoy isn't going to easily forgive, even though he recognizes that Crabbe was coerced by Voldemort. He's seen Goyle a few times, and he said that for old times' sake he'll keep in touch, but they were never really friends; it was more of a power relationship. He helped them, they helped him. In a way—and this is really strange, but—"

Luna finished his sentence. "You're the only real friend he has."

“The only one that isn’t based on power, yes,” agreed Harry. “Of course, people will want to be on good terms with the Auror Leader, and Malfoy’s still a Slytherin. He’s made a few jokes like that, but we both know it isn’t based on that.”

“I was so surprised,” said Hermione, “when he told you he was going to take the N.E.W.T.s, do it by private study.” A week after Voldemort had been defeated, Malfoy had told Harry that he’d decided to finish his studies, his family hiring highly qualified private tutors to help him.

“Yeah, me too,” agreed Harry. “When Luna and I were there, his mother was saying how she hardly ever saw him, he was so busy studying and taking lessons.”

“Well, he has a lot to do,” said Hermione. “He has to do a year’s work in five months. He never was the bookworm type, though.”

“I think he just needed something to do, something he could dive into and not worry about anything else,” said Harry. “He said he was at loose ends for a week afterwards, and just decided, why not.”

“Because it’s a lot of work?” suggested Ron.

“Yeah, I’d think so too,” said Harry. “I think it appealed to him because it was quiet, after all the activity he’d been through, and it was a step away from trying to get his hands on power, which was always his main purpose before.”

“Oh, he’ll get back to that,” joked Ron.

“I’m sure he will; he actually made a joke like that as well. He also said that he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life explaining to people why he didn’t have his N.E.W.T.s.”

“As opposed to us, who will,” said Ron.

“On the other side, nobody would have to ask us,” said Harry. “I think you two aren’t quite so famous on this side as you were over there. Malfoy has taken over some of that for you.”

Hermione grunted. "He's welcome to it."

After a short silence, Luna returned to the topic they'd discussed earlier. "One good thing about tonight is that at least everyone will know for sure what our future will be. I know some people aren't happy with the uncertainty."

Ron regarded her curiously. "How certain are you that your dreams were right?"

"Oh, 100%," she said casually. "I was talking about everyone else, who can't be sure. For me, it feels like something I know, not just something I think. But I don't expect everyone else to automatically believe me."

Within a half a second after the last word was spoken, they were all on the island. To Harry's surprise, he was near the main table; he was reclining in a conjured lounge chair, clearly put there for his benefit. Everyone looked at each other, but no one spoke. Two seconds passed. Three, four, five, six...

They were back in the Park. Again, no one spoke for a second. Finally—appropriately, it seemed to Harry—it was George who spoke. "So, Luna, what would you charge to have a dream about a lottery, or another large-scale gambling event?"

Most everyone laughed, including Luna. "I'd be happy to give you the information for free," she said innocently.

"Can you give it to me, and only me?" he pressed.

She waited a beat, then answered, in the same tone as before. "I'm afraid I'd have to charge you for that," she deadpanned; this got an even bigger laugh, as Luna wasn't known for making jokes.

Harry leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then stood. "I think I'll be getting that information first," he said to George.

"Like you need more money," grumbled George.

Harry faced all present. Raising his voice to be heard, he said, "Okay, so unless something very strange is going on, that was our answer: we're going back." He noted the relative lack of strong reaction; no one was celebrating, but no one was complaining either.

"This means that we're going to intensify the training program. I'd guess that for a few weeks, the switches are going to be so short that we needn't worry about when they come. After that, Terry and Hermione will be able to provide us with a schedule. Once the switches start becoming four hours or more, I want us to adjust our sleep schedules so we're sleeping when we're on the island, and doing training here. No offense to our Kingsley and Hestia, but the chance to train with so many veteran Aurors won't come again, so we need to make the most of it.

"So far, we've managed to keep the switching a secret from the public on this side. We'll keep it that way for as long as possible. What I'd like to do is have as many of you as possible go out on patrols with Aurors, but the problem with that is that it would raise questions that our counterparts might not want to answer. You know, 'weren't you training with Aurors?' when they have no desire to become an Auror. So, I'll be looking for some way to explain that away. This side may not be exactly the same as our side, but it's pretty close. You'll be making patrols over there, and these Aurors have a lot of information based on personal experience that would be highly useful." He paused. "Any questions or comments so far?"

Lee raised a hand. "Yeah, one of the Aurors was telling me that one of the women in Hogsmeade is a nymphomaniac. Is that the kind of highly useful information you're talking about?"

Harry laughed along with the others, then answered. "You know she's 58 years old, right?"

This was met with more laughter, and scoffing from a few of the women. "What, you mean if she was a 20-year-old nymphomaniac, that would be much more useful information?" joked Angelina.

"More appealing, anyway," responded Lee; Angelina hit him playfully.

“Any man here,” said Harry, “who finds himself approached by a woman who makes herself sexually available very quickly would be well advised to consider it a character test, and act accordingly.”

George responded instantly. “You’d also be well advised to do a Polyjuice check, to make sure it isn’t Harry himself.”

In the midst of the laughter, Lee added, “Or a 58-year-old woman using Polyjuice to look 20. Apparently she’s done that before.”

Harry chuckled, then spoke again. “Okay, this briefing is degenerating fast, but it’s my fault for trying to talk business when people have been drinking—“

George held up a glass of ale. “You think Lee’s only a degenerate after he’s been drinking? Right charitable of you, but I know better.”

“So I’ll wrap it up there, and get back to it tomorrow. We meet in the lounge at noon.”

Harry wandered around and chatted with most everyone a bit before resuming his seat and talking to Ron, Hermione, and Luna. They still had a lot of work to do, but it was important to have a nice break once in a while.

* * * * *

The next day, Harry woke up relatively early; he’d expected most who’d been at the gathering to wake up late, perhaps with hangovers, but he himself hadn’t drunk much. Hermione was up, and helped him with breakfast; Ron, having drunk a bit more, was still asleep.

Harry had asked Luna to live with him at Grimmauld Place, but she preferred to stay with her father, whom they both knew didn’t have much time left. Now they knew that even if this version of Xenophilius lived longer than the other one, she would have a limited time to be with him. She wanted to make the most of it.

There was a meeting planned with most of the Aurors for ten a.m., to tell them what had happened the night before and lay out his plans

for the training of the Aurors-to-be. After breakfast, he had over an hour to kill. Normally he'd stay in, maybe do mail, but he felt restless.

For no good reason, he Apparated to the room in Auror Headquarters that contained the... intelligence, energy field, whatever, that one was put into when taking the Auror Leader test. When he'd visited the room soon after going public as Auror Leader, he'd been disappointed but not surprised to find that the room that contained the Auror Leader portraits had been invisible to him. Apparently one had to have taken the test in this dimension to see that room in this dimension.

He'd also sat in the chair that he hadn't been in since he took the Leader test, and that had failed to yield any results; he'd been hoping to be spoken to by the intelligence so he could ask it questions. He sat in it again now, not expecting anything to have changed; as he sat, it occurred to him that it was not unlike someone who in the Muggle world checks the coin return of a phone booth in case some change has been left behind. One doesn't expect it to have happened, but trying can't hurt.

To his great surprise, however, he was immediately confronted with a familiar figure: Jeffrey Ambers, the thirteenth person to pass the Auror Leader test, but unknown to history because he took his own life soon after passing the test. By Harry's reckoning, it had been about eight months since the first time they'd spoken.

Harry stood. "Hello, Jeffrey," he said, offering his hand, which the other man shook. "I know you're not only him, but also the intelligence talking through him. But for my purposes, I should call you something."

The man nodded. "Jeffrey is fine, of course, but you could call me 'Winston Churchill' and I'd have no problems with that either," he said humorously. "Neither the intelligence nor the man has much of an ego."

"I guess that makes sense," agreed Harry. "Why is it that you'll talk to me now, but you wouldn't the last time I tried?"

“That time, you were asking for yourself,” said Ambers. “Now, you’re asking for someone else. That makes quite a difference.”

“I see,” said Harry, trying to hide his mild annoyance even though he was sure the intelligence knew his state of mind very well. “So, can anything be done for him?”

“You must know that we won’t answer such a broad question. Even if it isn’t for yourself, this is not unlike saying, ‘please solve all my problems for me.’ That’s not what we’re here for.”

“I feel like asking what you are here for, but I suspect you wouldn’t answer that either—“

“Correct,” interrupted Ambers.

“But there must be something you’re willing to tell me, or else you wouldn’t be talking to me. Right?”

Anders shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. It depends on which questions you ask.”

“First of all, I’m curious... you are basically the same one as exists on my side, right?”

“I could answer your question by pointing out that in a very real sense all that exists in the multiverse is one. However, I understand what you want to ask, so I will simply say yes.”

“I appreciate that,” said Harry dryly. “Maybe I’ll come back after I’ve studied up on metaphysics. So, should I assume that if I propose a possible solution, you’ll be willing to tell me whether or not it’ll work?”

There was a hint of a smile on Ambers’ face. “Perhaps.”

“Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. So, what if they took him to that place in Thailand, where people go for quests? They put him in that area, he does the trials or whatever, and you take away the Horcrux?” Harry was assuming as a matter of course that this entity could remove the Horcrux, but given its other powers—such as

conferring on him multiple enhancements given only to the Auror Leader—it didn't seem like an unreasonable assumption.

Ambers shook his head. "He must have a conscious intention to do the quest. Since he is in a coma, and in great pain when he is not, that is something we cannot know."

Harry sighed lightly. "You can't just assume that he'd rather do the quest than stay how he is?"

Ambers' expression reminded Harry of a parent mildly disappointed in a child who sought to trick him. "We cannot assume he would rather do the quest than remain how he is in the hope that another method will come along. There are rules to these things."

Harry thought to ask if he could see the rulebook, but he realized that Ambers meant to express it in terms Harry could understand. He also realized that if his counterpart went into it without intention and foreknowledge, he might see it as something imposed on him to be endured, rather than a trial he had chosen himself, for his own reasons.

Time for the other idea, thought Harry. He'd only come in with two.

"I was put in the Auror Leader test without my knowledge," said Harry. "This means that he could be too. If he was, is it possible that one of the effects of the test—since the Auror Leader is 'modified' anyway—could be to remove anything foreign from his head?"

Ambers nodded, impressed. "You have, in fact, hit upon the only solution that I, we, can offer. It would be as you say."

Surprised, Harry decided he needed more specific information. "So, you mean if he passes the test, the Horcrux would be removed?"

Harry's heart sank for a moment as Ambers shook his head, but soon recovered. "No. His mind must be in a certain condition for the test to be done, so if he is deemed worthy to take the test, the Horcrux would simply be removed at the outset. He would be free of it whether he passed or failed."

This wasn't extremely encouraging to Harry in the sense that the test was traumatic whether one passed or failed, but it was certainly more so if one passed. Still, there appeared to be a way out.

"You said, if he's deemed worthy. I'm basically him, so if I was worthy, wouldn't he be?"

"One would think so," agreed Ambers. "It is simply that you are not to take it as a given. Your life does differ from his, after all. You had already sacrificed yourself when you took the test. He has not."

Harry was about to argue that if his other self had been in the same situation he would have, but held back, as he realized it was obvious, and Ambers was simply telling him not to take it for granted. Harry felt it very likely that his counterpart would be allowed to take the test. He thought, trying to determine if any other questions needed to be asked.

He couldn't think of any that had to do with his counterpart's Horcrux problem, so he decided to ask another he'd considered the first time he'd tried to talk to the entity. "Can you tell me what was responsible for the switching starting in the first place?"

Ambers gave him a patient smile. "You know we will not, of course. It's kind of you to try, since you do so on Luna's behalf. It is understandable that this has distressed her, but we choose not to interfere in matters like this. Some things must remain mysteries. But at least you will be able to tell her that you asked."

This last was said with amusement; Harry had had the thought a few seconds before, and he wondered whether the entity had plucked it out of his head, or intuited that he would have the thought.

"Okay, thanks," he said, unable to think of any other questions that had a chance of being answered, and not wanting to overstay his welcome.

"I do want to say one other thing," said Ambers, "a piece of advice. This is more from the human than the entity, though of course they

cannot be separated. It is this: forgive Kingsley. Both in your heart, and to his face. You have done enough now as Auror Leader that benefited society at the cost to individuals—including the one you seek to help—that you understand why he did as he did. Doing as I suggest would help you both, though needless to say, you should do it only if it is in your heart to do so. I believe it is.”

Harry understood that he needn’t say or decide what he planned to do; there was no pressure, just the suggestion. “Thank you, Jeffrey. I’ll think about that.” Ambers nodded, and disappeared.

Harry sat in the chair and thought. He’d been furious at Kingsley for subjecting him to the Auror Leader test without his consent, and while he’d later understood that Kingsley hadn’t done it lightly and regretted the necessity, he’d never explicitly said he forgave him, even though Kingsley had once seemed to indicate that he hoped to be forgiven. Harry had, more recently, gone public as Auror Leader even knowing that it could seriously complicate the life of his counterpart, who hadn’t been in a position to object. Is it the same thing? Is it close enough? He contemplated the question, and related ones, for so long he almost forgot about his ten o’clock meeting with the Aurors.

* * * * *

Four weeks later, Harry was sitting on his bed in Grimmauld Place, putting memories into a glass cylinder. Finished, he magically etched the date into the glass, and put it into the rack he’d purchased. It now contained twenty cylinders, and there was room for many more, more than he would need.

No decision had been made about the other Harry and his Horcrux. His counterpart might yet become Auror Leader; in any case, he wanted to keep the other Harry’s life as undisturbed as possible. Maybe, he thought, ‘not as badly screwed up’ might be a better way to put it.

He was essentially creating an archive of memories for the other Harry, should a way be found for him to recover his life. If he ended up becoming Auror Leader, the ideal situation would be one in which this dimension’s Harry could continue his life without having to

explain the switching. Aurors had agreed that Harry's deception when going public could later undermine public confidence in his counterpart, even though the latter would have been blameless. Leaving these memories gave his counterpart the option of pretending it had been him all along, if he chose.

He archived memories according to two criteria: they should explain what had happened well enough that his counterpart would understand completely what had happened in his absence, and they should contain all memories of interactions with anyone who didn't know about the switching, so he wouldn't have to plead to too many lapses of memory.

It appeared more and more likely that the other Harry would have to take the Auror Leader test, as no other solution had presented itself. He had told Ron and Hermione's counterparts in a Pensieve message what Ambers had said. To his surprise, for the next three switches they left no response. Finally, they said that they'd prefer that he made the decision, as being another version of Harry, he should know best what his counterpart would want.

Harry's Ron and Hermione, viewing the message, both said they felt that their counterparts were leaving the decision to Harry not because he would know best what their friend would want, but because they didn't want the responsibility for having made the decision. They wanted to be able to tell their Harry that the other one had decided to put him into the Auror Leader test, or at least, that it was at his behest that it had been done. Harry was annoyed with them at first—after all, what other options were there?—but the more he thought about it, the more he could understand their attitude. Though there might be no other solution, his counterpart might be even angrier at being thrown into the test than he had been. Better that the blame be directed at someone safely out of reach in another dimension. He would also likely blame Malfoy for the mistake in trying to withdraw the Horcrux, though Harry hoped he wouldn't, as it had been an honest and understandable mistake.

He decided to wait longer to make the final decision. In mid-May the Voldemort of his dimension would die, after which making foreign inquiries into the properties of a Horcrux would be significantly less

dangerous, both to their cause and to the timeline. He would send Kingsley to Australia again, and he would make inquiries again through Foster. He left the other Ron and Hermione a Pensieve message to this effect, and got no reply. It appeared to him that they were washing their hands of it. It was his problem now.

* * * * *

Kingsley spent the better part of a week in late May off the island, but came back empty-handed; Foster had helped him as much as he could, but no new information could be found. Harry thanked him for the effort, and deciding on the spur of the moment to accept Ambers' advice, told Kingsley that he'd forgiven him for putting him into the Auror Leader test. Kingsley's response was understated, but it was clear to Harry that he appreciated it.

Harry waited another week, then in early June, decided there was no more reason to put it off. Respecting the other Ron and Hermione's obvious wish not to be involved, he asked Mel and Spencer to put his other self into the Auror Leader test. He left a message to his counterpart that he would see when he came out of the test, explaining it and why it had been necessary, and ordered Mel and Spencer not to reveal to him that they had put him there; he would accept the responsibility himself.

In the switch after the other Harry took the test, for the first time in months Harry was not lying down at the time of the switch. He went from talking to others on the island to sitting in a chair in what appeared to be a hotel room. Investigation showed that it was a Muggle hotel in the north of France.

He returned to England, and discovered that no one knew whether his counterpart had passed or not; he had just disappeared. Not too surprising, thought Harry, recalling how he had felt at the time. He made certain to return to the room he'd been in by the time of the next switch.

Back on the island, Kingsley told Harry that his counterpart had stayed in his tent and rejected all entreaties to talk, even to Ron and Hermione. Wow, he's taking this badly, thought Harry. Again, though,

he remembered that he had wanted to talk to no one after his experience, going so far as to Stun Dudley for not respecting his wishes. Back on the other side, he started to create a cover story, telling the Aurors to let it be known to the media that he would be going on a private 'retreat' to study and build up his skills, and would return when he was ready. He left this information in a note in his own hand—there were no Pensieves where his counterpart was staying—and again got no response.

A month went by, and the situation didn't change. He continued to get no messages from his counterpart, who continued to isolate himself. Finally, he started to hear that his counterpart was talking to his Ron and Hermione on the island. He assumed this was happening on the other side as well, but he got no information about it.

In late July, the time Harry and the others were spending on the other side was two hours a day and decreasing fast; within two weeks it would be down to fifteen minutes every two days, and in a month, no more than a second. Not only had he not heard from his counterpart, but he had no idea whether the other Harry had passed the Auror Leader test or not. The apparent depth of depression caused him to think that the test had been passed, but he couldn't know for sure.

At the next switch, which was at a little before ten p.m., Harry got a stronger indication of what was happening, just one he didn't expect. Sitting in his tent alone waiting for the switch, he suddenly found himself lying in his bed... arms around Ginny, in the middle of a passionate kiss, as naked as she was.

They stopped kissing, but didn't jump apart from each other as he might have expected they would. They separated from each other in a natural way, as if having been doing something that by mutual consent they had decided to stop. They gave each other a wry glance. "Well, it looks like he's getting over it," he said.

"And she's helping him," she observed in the same vein. She looked around. "Where are my clothes?"

Harry looked, and found them. "On the floor, on this side. I think the underwear are in the corner over there."

Shaking her head in amusement, she got up and unselfconsciously walked over to where he was pointing. "Excuse my lack of modesty, but you have seen this before."

"Don't think I ever saw from behind, actually," he pointed out.

"Then I'll just keep my front facing you," she joked, though it was her side that faced him as she bent at the knees to pick up the underwear, and quickly put them on.

He chuckled. "Here you go," he said, tossing her bra at her.

"Thanks," she said. "Where are your clothes, anyway?"

"Probably in the laundry hamper," he said. He picked up his wand and started Summoning clothes from the drawers.

"I hope Luna didn't choose this moment to look through your eyes."

"I think she'd know what happened. So, do you think they just made a mistake?"

"By sleeping together?"

He gave her a 'very funny' look. "By leaving us in this position at the switch. She, at least, knows we're both involved with other people, and I'd be surprised if he didn't know as well."

"I have to think it's a mistake," she said, silently chiding him for thinking otherwise. "Maybe they were talking, one thing led to another, they got carried away, and forgot what time it was. I could imagine it happening."

He shrugged as he put on his underwear, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Maybe. It's just that since my counterpart was in a coma, I always had to be very conscious of when the switch was. Forgetting could be very bad—"

“Hey, Harry,” said Ron, starting to speak just before he walked through the door. “You’ll never guess—” He was stopped cold by the sight of his sister and his friend still half-naked, in the process of getting dressed. His mouth hung open.

Ginny laughed. “I’m going to remember this expression.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile as well. “You were saying, Ron?”

For a few seconds, Ron was speechless. Finally, he exclaimed, “What the hell happened?”

Harry and Ginny shared an amused look. “What does it look like?” asked Harry.

“I know what it looks like! I want to know what it is!”

“What what is?” asked Hermione, coming up behind him. She was surprised, but not as shocked as Ron. Looking back and forth, she took it in quickly. “Oh, I see.”

As she finished buttoning her shirt, Ginny chuckled. “Now, Ron, you don’t see her asking what happened. I think she’s figured it out.”

Hermione nodded. “Your counterparts were, um, doing it.”

“Well, not exactly, fortunately,” clarified Harry. “Either they were about to do it, or they had done it already. We can’t know which, of course.”

“I’d guess, the first,” said Ginny, now finished dressing. “I think people are more likely to be kissing like they were before they do it, rather than after.”

“Good point,” agreed Harry.

“In which case,” Ginny continued, “on the island, she’s on her way over to his tent as we speak.”

Harry nodded casually. “Then it’s kind of inconvenient, since they have to take off their clothes again.”

Ginny shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes, that's one of the fun parts." She ignored the shocked look on her brother's face.

"Yeah," responded Harry, "but not if you have to keep doing it."

To everyone's surprise, Luna entered the room. "Keep doing what?"

So confident was Harry in Luna's reaction that he wasn't nervous, as he imagined he would be with most other women in the same situation. "We'd have to have the conversation over again to explain. When we got here, Ginny and I were—"

"Oh, I know," she said, as calmly as Harry knew she would. "I look through your eyes as soon as we get back here, to find out what you're doing."

"You got quite an eyeful, then," said Ginny.

"Yes, that's true," agreed Luna, "but it was a lot more interesting for Harry than it was for me. I noticed his eyes lingering in certain places just a little longer than they should have." She glanced at Harry with amusement to let him know that while what she said was true, she didn't hold it against him.

Ginny laughed. "Well, he is a man."

"That's true," said Luna. "And it was only a tiny bit longer. Just enough to realize he shouldn't do it, then his eyes moved."

He hoped they'd stop teasing him soon. "I'm glad my behavior was adequate, anyway," he said sarcastically.

Ron gave him a familiar look. "We'll talk about it later."

Ginny whirled and pointed at her brother accusingly. "No, you won't. I've had more than enough of the protective brother routine. If I want to walk through Diagon Alley naked, that's my business." She paused, thinking. "Say, that sounds interesting. I might want to try that."

Harry, Hermione, and Luna laughed at Ginny's obvious broadside against her brother, who rolled his eyes. "All right, you've made your point. But how did this happen?"

Ginny answered. "I think they just lost track of time, but Harry seemed to be suggesting that it was on purpose."

"I told you that I just remember it more because I always had to be very careful," protested Harry. "But I admit I was also thinking that my counterpart might not have cared. He's not exactly completely with it. Not that I blame him, of course."

"But you think he blames you," said Hermione kindly.

He hadn't said it to her, but he supposed it wasn't hard to figure out. "He hasn't said a thing to me, so it's easy for me to think that he thought like, if this is awkward for you, too bad. Maybe I shouldn't think that, but..."

"Why would he blame you?" asked Ron. "It's not like there was much choice."

Harry knew the answer to that. "He needs someone to blame. He might also blame Malfoy, even though he knows Malfoy did his best. But I was the one who put him in there. I more or less agreed to be the one he'd blame. Anyway, I just hope he didn't fall into this without thinking."

Ginny turned to dispute him, though more gently than she did Ron. "Harry, I don't need your protection either. My counterpart can make her own decisions."

"I wasn't trying to—"

"I know, you have my best interests at heart—"

"After that happened to me, my decision-making wasn't the best—"

“And if she wants to comfort him, what’s wrong with that? She knows he has feelings for her. Do you think he’s going to just use her and throw her away?”

Silence reigned. Finally, Luna walked over to Harry and took his hand. “I don’t think you, or your counterpart, would do that. No matter what you’d been through. That’s not who you are.”

Hearing it from her affected him more than it would have from anyone else. “I suppose you’re right,” he conceded. “I was... just worried about Ginny.”

Luna glanced at Ginny, then looked at Harry. “It’s very kind of you. But I think she can take care of herself.”

“Okay,” said Harry, wanting to end the conversation. “Anyway, I’m still hoping to find out whether or not he passed.”

Hermione’s tone showed that she knew that he wouldn’t want to hear what she had to say. “At some point, that stops being anything we have to do with. Under a month, to be exact. I understand why you want to know, but you might have to just let it go.”

He nodded somberly as Luna put an arm around his waist and gave him a few quick pats. Yes, he thought, maybe I have to. But it’s not easy.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, he used the better part of one of the last switches to say goodbye to the Aurors, giving a short speech and shaking hands with everyone. He would truly miss them, and it saddened him even more that they had died on the other side. They had been of great help, and he knew that he and the trainees would benefit greatly from their experience and advice.

A week after that, there were only three more switches before they became less than a second long, and the other Harry’s isolation had continued. He talked only to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and had communicated nothing, nor had those he talked to. No doubt at his

request, thought Harry. Ginny's counterpart had apologized to her for the Grimmauld Place bedroom incident, but Harry's had said nothing.

On the third-to-last switch, Harry said goodbye to Malfoy; he had already done Remus and the other-side Weasleys. The second-to-last would only be thirty seconds, hardly enough to do anything; he simply stayed in the bedroom at Grimmauld Place, not attempting to do anything. Three days later would come the last chance at any communication; it would be for six seconds, which would be enough to put a memory in the Pensieve. The switch after that would be for only one second, not long enough for any purpose at all. For the last two switches, Harry had sat in a tent with a Pensieve nearby, but no messages had been left.

As the last one approached, he sat in the tent again. To the others, he had behaved as usual, easing back into the island routine they would follow for the final two months of their stay. He didn't talk to anyone but Luna about his hope to hear from his counterpart, mainly because while he felt it strongly, he didn't feel good about it. It felt unimportant and selfish. Was it because he was truly concerned about his other self, or because he wanted some kind of forgiveness, much as Kingsley had? He wasn't sure. Luna said that even if it was the latter, it was a natural feeling, and there was nothing wrong with it. He should simply try to understand if his counterpart had nothing to say.

He sat at the desk and counted down, looking at his watch. Seven, six, five, four, three, two, one...

He was in the briefing room at the Park; it appeared that every Auror was there, and he was facing them. Greatly surprised, he glanced around. They broke into brief applause, stopping after a few seconds, clearly knowing time was short. Harry smiled, said 'thank you', and was back in the tent. He looked into the Pensieve: nothing was there.

Sighing, he stood. Well, at least that told me a few things. He passed the test, which I had thought; it explains why he was so withdrawn. He's getting back into public life, since he's meeting the Aurors, which he hadn't done before. I guess this means that he's probably still

recovering, but in the end he's going to be all right. He walked out of the tent with at least that much to hold onto.

He was approached by Ron and Hermione. To his surprise, Hermione held a glass cylinder in her right hand, and gestured him back into the tent. "My counterpart must have conjured this and put the memory in it," she explained as she placed it into the Pensieve.

"Pretty fast work in six seconds," said an impressed Harry; he silently called Luna, and she was there in less than a minute. The four placed their hands inside the Pensieve.

In the memory, the other Hermione spoke. "Hello, Harry. I know you wanted to hear from the other one. There was nothing he wanted to say, but he didn't object to my doing this.

"As I'm sure you know, he's been in a bad way since the Leader test, much as Hermione's told me you were after you took it. Ron and I have been doing what we can, and of course Ginny's been a great help. More than anyone else, she's responsible for him starting to come out of a very difficult time. They're a couple now, and they seem very committed to each other. We really think they'll have a good future together. As, of course, I hope you and Luna do on your side. I think both Ginny and Luna are good for you, just in different ways.

"Of course, he's not happy with you, which I'm sure you knew. It's not so much for the Auror Leader test itself, since that seemed to be the only way to get the Horcrux out. It's more for your going public as Auror Leader, which he says he would have violently protested if he could have been asked. Personally, to be honest, I'm not so sure that's true. I don't think he was lying, of course, but that if the situation had been explained to him in great detail, including the lives that were saved by you doing what you did, he probably would have changed his mind. I think he's just resentful of the fact that his life went careening out of his control, which is understandable.

"He could have just refused to act as Auror Leader, and at first, that's what he insisted he would do. Over the past two months, he's slowly come around on that. Only two weeks ago did he start to watch the

memories you left for him, and I think that seeing what you did, what he could do, started to change his mind. He's meeting the Aurors today; he says he's just going to tell them that he's still not sure what he'll do in the future, and he needs more time to work it out. I think he will end up doing it; it just has to be on his terms. When he's ready. So, don't worry about his future. He has Ginny, and he has us to help him. He'll be all right.

"As for me, there's one more thing. I watched all the memories you left for him, and they were very interesting. You and the others did a great job on this side, for this society, and you should be proud. I'm sorry that you and the others had to suffer so much the day that Voldemort was defeated. I know that you understand why we did it, but still, I wanted to say that. Oh, and I heard today that for that, they're going to give Merlin Firsts to Harry and Malfoy for their roles in Voldemort's defeat. Harry's not happy about it, since he didn't do it, but the ceremony won't be for another three months, and I think we'll be able to talk him into it by then.

"Anyway... it's been an interesting year, and it was fascinating to see what would have happened if things had gone another way, like they did with you. I think that Harry will become as good an Auror Leader as you, because in fact, he is you. Good luck, and my love to you and everyone there. Goodbye."

Harry and his friends removed their hands from the Pensieve and looked at each other. "That was very nice of her," observed Luna.

"Yes, it was," agreed Harry, who looked at his Hermione with gratitude, even though she herself hadn't sent the message. It was enough, he felt, for him to be able to look back on that part of his life without a lot of regret. He now realized that this was what had been plaguing him for the past few weeks, why he'd been unable to shake it from his mind. He'd needed... what was the Muggle word? Ah, yes, he thought, closure. Now I have that, or at least, enough. Time to think about the future. In two days, Luna has an appointment to keep, in England...

* * * * *

Three days later, Harry pointed his wand at the door in the public wizarding space, and said the number he'd been told, 373. After a wait of a few seconds, an attractive, short-haired woman of middle age answered the door.

"Can I help—" Her face lit up as she recognized them. "Oh, you're Harry! Harry and Luna. Please, come in." She reached for Harry's hand and gently pulled him through the door, then Luna.

A tall, friendly man entered the living room they were suddenly in. "I'm George Foster," he said, extending his hand and offering a smile.

Harry shook it. "Harry Potter, and this is Luna Lovegood."

"Very pleased to meet you. We've heard a lot about you—"

A small girl came running into the room. "Hi!" she said happily and loudly.

Harry couldn't help but grin. "Hi," he said. "I'm Harry Potter."

"Yes, you are," agreed the girl; Harry raised his eyebrows slightly at the odd reply. "And you're Luna," added the girl. "George said we're alike."

Luna knelt to be at eye level with the girl. "I'd like to think so. It's really nice to meet you, Angel."

Angel looked at Luna for a few seconds in silence. Finally she spoke, her tone earnest. "It's not your fault."

Luna gasped slightly, and tears welled up instantly. She reached out to hug the girl. "I know," she said, as a few tears escaped. "But sometimes what you know is different from what you feel. Thank you."

Harry felt a tear or two rising just from witnessing the scene. "She's amazing."

“Yes, she is,” agreed Foster. He gestured them into the living room, and they sat. “You just got here from England?”

Harry nodded. “We had to go for a day or so, for Luna to say goodbye to her father. I assume George told you about that. To be honest, except to thank you for all your help—especially with George, but the other things as well—I’m not sure why we’re here. George just insisted that we come, but wouldn’t say any more.”

Foster smiled. “As you know, he paid us an afternoon visit a week ago, and he asked a favor of us that we’re only too happy to oblige, if you’re up for it. He said you’ve had a rough go of it for the past while—I assume that has to do with whatever Angel is referring to—and you could use a rest. What he, and we, would like is for you to stay here for a week, and just relax. Eat home-cooked meals, stay in or see the sights as you choose, but most importantly, for a week, forget about being Auror Leader. Everyone needs a break once in a while.”

Harry exchanged a look with Luna. He wondered why George hadn’t just suggested it to him, but he realized that George probably feared that Harry would just say no without thinking about it much. In the actual situation, it felt different.

“That sounds like exactly what we need,” agreed Harry. “Thank you very much, it’s very nice of you. That George is a clever fellow.”

Foster nodded. “I’m sure he would agree with you.”

They both laughed. “Yes, he would,” agreed Harry. He put his arm around Luna as Foster started to show them around the house. He knew without a doubt that it would be a very pleasant week.

Epilogue

“So, Potter, you wanted to see me?”

It was October 8, 1998, an ordinary day to most people in the wizarding world. To Harry and a dozen and a half others, it was an exceptional one: their first full day back after spending a year on a

South Pacific island. Or, rather, after spending much—though not nearly all—of their time on that island.

It felt strange to be back, and it felt even stranger to be unremarked upon returning from such an unusual adventure. As Harry walked around Diagon Alley in the morning, he was greeted in a friendly and casual way by those he often saw when making the rounds. Just another day.

The others had strict instructions not to tell a single person what had happened without his permission. As Auror Leader, however, he was at liberty to decide what to say to whom. One of the first things he'd done that morning was to send an owl to Draco Malfoy, asking to meet him near the main fireplace in Diagon Alley at 10:00 a.m., or owl back to propose another time and place. At ten on the nose, Malfoy walked through the fireplace.

"Yeah, Malfoy," he responded. "Thanks for coming. Have you got a free half hour or so?"

Malfoy sized Harry up. "Depends."

"I want to tell you a story."

Malfoy's eyes lit up. "A story? Oh, boy, a story! Do the prince and princess live happily ever after? Does the good wizard win?"

In spite of having been mocked, Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "You should have been an actor, Malfoy. You're not bad."

"Don't say that last part too loudly," Malfoy stage-whispered. "In fact, I shouldn't be seen with you in such a public place."

"Then let's go. Can I have your permission to Apparate you there?"

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "Where are we going?"

"To the land of milk and honey, where dreams come true—"

"Stuff it, Potter. It's a reasonable question."

“Yes, it is, but it’s also true that I want to tell you a story. And obviously you don’t know the place we’re going, since I have to Apparate you there. Okay?”

Malfoy feigned displeasure, but gestured his consent. “They’ll probably find my body in a shallow grave.”

Harry answered as he touched Malfoy’s shoulder, preparing to Apparate them away. “Don’t worry, Malfoy, I’ll make it plenty deep.”

“Ha ha ha.” They Apparated to Grimmauld Place, standing on the sidewalk.

“Well, I was just going with your joke,” responded Harry. He reached into his robe and took out a small piece of paper.

“Wow, it’s really a short story,” cracked Malfoy.

“You could say it’s the prologue.”

Malfoy opened the note and read: Twelve Grimmauld Place is the home of Harry Potter. Eyes wide, he looked at Harry. “What’s this for?”

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t want to invite myself over, and it’s better to do it here.”

Malfoy nodded. “Easier to clean up the blood.”

Harry was beginning to get annoyed. “You don’t have to come in if you—“

“All right, Potter. Your sense of humor has limits, I see.” They started towards the door.

“Sorry. The bit about blood hit a bit of a nerve, which you’ll see in the story.”

“I thought you were talking about that spell you hit me with, in sixth year.”

“Just so you know, I didn’t know what that spell would do.”

Malfoy glanced over in mild disbelief. “I’d say that using a violent spell like that is only marginally worse than using a spell whose effects you don’t know.”

Realizing that Malfoy was right, Harry nodded. “Not going to argue.”

“Very wise.” Harry glanced over, and could see that Malfoy was now genuinely curious as to what was up. “So, this story has violence.”

As he opened the door, Harry nodded. “Violence, suspense, and most of all, character development. Maria!”

The house-elf popped in from wherever she had been as Harry and Malfoy stepped inside. “M—Harry! It is good to see Harry again.”

Malfoy turned to Harry. “Why are you M—Harry?”

“I asked her not to call me ‘Master Harry’.”

“Yes, because that would really be degrading for you,” deadpanned Malfoy.

“Anyway, I wanted to introduce you. This is Maria, my new house-elf. She replaced Kreacher. Maria, this is Draco Malfoy.”

She bowed. “It is an honor to meet Harry’s friend. Can Maria get Harry anything?”

Harry glanced at Malfoy and shrugged. “Just two glasses of ice water, please.” Grateful to have been given a task, she bounded off to fulfill it.

Malfoy gave Harry a ‘you’re weird’ look. “I don’t suppose there’d be any point in telling you that you don’t introduce people to house-elves.”

“No, there wouldn’t. Because I am Harry Potter, he who has peculiar ideas about house-elves.”

“Well, as long as you’re aware—what the hell?!”

On the living room coffee table, there sat the Pensieve, along with a wooden rack that could hold fifty large glass cylinders; forty cylinders were resting in their slots, brimming with memories. Harry tried not to smile at Malfoy’s astonishment.

“It isn’t a short story.”

“How long is that going to take?”

“I’m not sure, but I think there’s about an hour’s worth in each one.”

“What is it, your life’s story? I already know more about that than I need to, Potter, it’s all in the Prophet. What do you know that could take this long?”

“Well, that would ruin the surprise. Trust me, it’ll be worth it.”

“And how do you plan to—ah, the artifact.” Harry had taken out of his pocket the artifact Malfoy had given him, that could stop time in a small space around the user.

They sat down. “Okay, I want to make sure we have the same understanding about this. Is everything we communicate assumed to be confidential unless otherwise stated, or does it need to be specified that any particular thing is confidential?”

Malfoy placed his hand over his heart. “I promise to keep your secrets confidential with the same zealously and competence with which you have kept mine.”

Harry rolled his eyes at the reference to his recent—to Malfoy, anyway—mistake in giving too much information about him to the Auror trainees. “I was hoping you could do a little better than that.”

Malfoy grinned. "Now you know how I feel."

"Got it. But, seriously."

"General understanding. Everything's confidential."

"Fine."

Malfoy turned on the device, which made time pass for the user at the rate of about one hour per second. Harry saw Malfoy take one cylinder, put it in, then almost immediately take it out, take another one, and do the same. In less than a minute, Malfoy had finished watching. Two glasses of ice water sat on the table.

Harry regarded Malfoy, who looked impressed. "Pretty interesting, huh?"

Malfoy leaned back on the sofa, and to Harry's surprise, spoke thoughtfully, dropping the tone of verbal sparring. "It is, actually. It's weird, to see how your life would have gone if this one thing had been different."

"Well, it's a pretty important one thing."

"Yeah, of course. Definitely one of the most important decisions of my life. One good thing about the Pensieve: if you'd just told me this story instead of showing it to me—"

"You wouldn't have believed it."

"Absolutely. Even if I was sure you weren't deliberately lying, I just couldn't have gotten myself to believe that I could do anything like that. Come up with a plan to beat the Dark Lord, sure. I could imagine that. But to risk my life, right in front of the Dark Lord, to protect Luna..." He shrugged. "Couldn't imagine it. But now I know what you meant about character development. It seems like I got into the whole thing a little bit at a time. I guess changes like that can happen in small steps, over time."

Harry nodded. "And what was interesting was that once the decision not to kill Dumbledore had been made, joining up with us was in your self-interest: we were the best bet for you not to get killed. At the beginning, I don't think you could have taken the kind of risk you did later. It slowly changed from self-interest to something more."

"Yeah. But keep in mind, Potter, the guy in those memories isn't me. Don't expect me to be like him."

"Obviously, I know that. But the thing is, it kind of is you. At least, it's a potential you."

"If things had gone a certain way," clarified Malfoy. "Yeah, obviously, it's a potential me. I mean, we all probably have a lot of potential selves, that could have gone various ways based on circumstances. What if you'd been born to my parents? What if I'd been the Boy Who Lived? Probably we wouldn't be the same people we are now. You could spend hours on this, and I'm sure some philosophers do. Seems like a waste of time to me, personally. We are who we are. Or, at least, it's a waste of time if you don't have a way to find out what would have been, like I just did. Anyway, what I meant before was that I wouldn't have imagined that even a potential Draco Malfoy could have acted in a self-sacrificing way."

Harry decided to go back to humor for a second. "At least now, you can't make fun of me for being self-sacrificing."

Malfoy immediately shook his head. "He can't. I can."

Of course, thought Harry with amusement. "I stand corrected."

Malfoy was back to being thoughtful. "But, you know... watching that, it seems to me that being self-sacrificing may not be that far from acting on self-interest, in a way. I mean, why did the other me protect Luna, and why did you walk into the forest? Same reason: we couldn't live with ourselves if we didn't. In the end, not that it wasn't for them at all, but in big part, it was for us."

“But then every action, no matter how generous or self-sacrificing, can be seen as self-interest, because it makes us feel good to be so generous.”

Malfoy nodded. “You’re catching on.”

“That’s kind of a depressing way of looking at it.”

Malfoy chuckled. “Sorry to burst your bubble, Potter. But if you want to, you can look at it this way: Some people, like you, are wired to consider generosity and self-sacrifice to be good, to be valuable. So, it’s in your self-interest to do it. Some, like me, aren’t. So if you want to feel good about yourself, you can be happy that you’re the kind of person who sees generosity and self-sacrifice as in your self-interest, whereas others don’t.”

“But then it just seems like I’m trying to make myself feel better, which is selfish as well.”

“And, boy, that would be bad,” said Malfoy mockingly. “Humans are selfish, Potter! We have to be, we wouldn’t have evolved if we weren’t. That’s one of the things I’ve never liked about ‘generous and self-sacrificing’ types, they want to deny that, they want to think they’re better than that. They’re not; they just get their satisfaction in a different way, and pat themselves on the back. At least you I can tolerate because you don’t pat yourself on the back; you suffer like everyone else.”

“I’d never thought about stuff like this much,” admitted Harry. “Kind of too philosophical, too... I don’t know, abstract.”

“Me neither, of course,” agreed Malfoy. “Like I said, waste of time. Only seeing something like this makes you think of it. And that reminds me, I was surprised by me, but even more by my father. It was like he just changed completely. I guess Azkaban was nastier than I thought.”

“Yeah. It’s like... when we had that talk, you said, sometimes pride is the only thing you have left. I think Azkaban took away your father’s pride. Once that was gone, he had no more desire for power. He had

no... cause, if you want to put it that way. I think after he got out of Azkaban, his new cause was protecting you, and the way to do that was to join us."

"Well, yeah, but I really do think it was more than that," said Malfoy. "There was some... very basic change, I think. It was as though there was some part of him that could be 'good' in a noble sort of way, and it had a chance to come out."

"That makes sense," agreed Harry. "And that reminds me. I'd like you to send an owl to your father. I'd like to meet with him."

Harry saw Malfoy's manner shift from being casual and philosophical to practical and calculating. "Why?"

"To discuss the question of his returning to society."

Malfoy didn't try to hide his surprise. "This is okay with Weasley's sister?"

"Now that I'm Auror Leader, that can't be a consideration. I'm going to do what I think is best for society."

Malfoy smirked. "Also, now that you're not her boyfriend..."

"I'd do the same thing." A beat. "But I admit that makes it easier."

"And why is my father coming back best for society?"

"I don't know at this point whether it is or not. But that experience opened my eyes to the possibility that it could be. I don't know how much of his pride your father lost in the past year. After the first go-around with Voldemort eighteen years ago, he was allowed to come back into society a little too easily, and he must have decided that he could game the system. In other words, he got away with it. As Auror Leader, I'm in a position to decide the terms on which he comes back."

Malfoy eyed Harry carefully. "And what terms would those be?"

“That’ll depend on how my talk with him goes. But it would almost certainly involve a public confession of everything he’s done that harmed society. I’d meet with him, think about it, then come back with my terms. He’d be free to accept it, in which case he comes back, or reject it, in which case he stays on the run, subject to capture and imprisonment.”

“And if he confessed, he wouldn’t spend any time in prison?”

“I’m not prepared to say that definitely, but probably not. There’d probably be some other form of restitution to society. Some sort of community service, and/or financial restitution to those he harmed, their families. Like that.”

“Just so you know, the Dark Lord commandeered a fair portion of our family wealth for his own purposes,” said Malfoy. Harry could see in Malfoy’s eyes his unhappiness at that fact, and he realized that Malfoy also saw the money as partly his own, as it would eventually be his inheritance.

Harry nodded. “That would be negotiable. It’s not like I want to clean him out. Just to get something as close to justice as I can. Of course, as we know this conversation is private, but you can feel free to tell him that I can detect lies. If he’s interested in coming back, he has to be honest with me.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” said Malfoy, with mild sarcasm. “You want to save him the trouble of coming up with a bunch of lies which, after finding out you can see through them, he won’t be able to use.”

“Basically,” said Harry. “In general, it’s better if he knows beforehand what he’d be getting into.”

“Well, that’s fair,” agreed Malfoy. “I’ll send him an owl later today, and let you know. Now, terms of the meeting: nothing he says will be used against him, and you promise he won’t be taken into custody if you don’t like how the meeting goes?”

Harry nodded. “I mean, he can’t just up and confess things so I won’t use it against him, but also, it’s not so likely that it would come down

to a legal proceeding. If he's answering a question, then yes, it wouldn't be used against him. As for the second thing, of course, he's free to leave after we're done. If he attacks or threatens me, obviously, all bets are off."

"Obviously," agreed Malfoy. "Okay, I'll let him know. Now, one other—"

"Oh, wait, before I forget... I'd also like you to introduce me to Mr. Blackstone. I found that I had a lot of respect for him, and I think his advice could be very helpful."

"Okay. Let's wait on that, see how it goes with my father first."

Harry couldn't help but grin. "Ah, now there's Malfoy being Malfoy. Trying for any advantage you can—"

"Hey, you have your own interests in mind in talking to him," pointed out Malfoy. "Why can't I look after mine?"

Harry shrugged. "I was asking as a courtesy. I could go find him myself."

"If I ask him not to talk to you, he won't," said Malfoy with just a shade of smugness.

"True. Well, that'll be up to you. All I can say is that it's not going to affect what happens with your father. And I'm surprised that you seem to think I'm not going to be fair with him. After all, most people would say he deserves—"

"Oh, don't get all self-righteous, Potter," cut in Malfoy disdainfully. "Like you said, I'm just being Malfoy, being a Slytherin. You want to deal with me, you have to get used to that."

"I wouldn't have you any other way," joked Harry. "Well, let me know when you're ready to introduce me. By the way, what's his first name?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed with incredulity. "You spent all that time around him, and you never knew that?"

"I just always called him 'Mr. Blackstone', because you did," explained Harry. He regarded Malfoy expectantly.

Malfoy sighed lightly, as if mildly embarrassed. "His first name is Draco."

Harry tried not to smile. "Ah. Well, he is your godfather. Anyway, you were going to say something else?"

"Yes. I want to know why you showed me all this," he said, gesturing to the cylinders.

Harry shrugged. "I thought it would be interesting for you, since you were the... central figure, I guess, in what happened over there. The point of divergence between this dimension and that one was your decision about Dumbledore."

Malfoy appeared to have been trying to be patient in listening to Harry's explanation. "Yeah, but that's not what I meant. Let's try again. I'll put it this way: what was your self-interested reason?"

Taken slightly aback, Harry found he had to think. "I suppose... I think I could say that the other Malfoy and I got to be friends. I don't know if he'd want to say it like that, but he probably wouldn't disagree with it. I know you're not him, but I'd like to think it's possible. That's one thing.

"The other is that, as I'm sure you saw, I respected his—and therefore, your—judgment, strategic thinking, and understanding of power. I also saw that it's possible for you to realize you made a mistake, and learn from it—"

"Does this mean that I have to start asking Granger what she thinks of everything?" asked Malfoy sarcastically. "Because I'd really rather not."

Harry smiled. "That's up to you. Anyway, the point is that I'd like to be able to consult you on things from time to time. You look at things in a way I don't, and as your counterpart said to Hermione, I need to see things in that way. Your perspective would be valuable to me.

"There's a position—not exactly a formal one, but every Auror Leader has had one—that's called 'Devil's Advocate'. It's the person the Auror Leader tells most everything about what he does, and that person's job is to provide opposing views, question the Leader, make him explain himself. Point out things the Leader might be making mistakes on, not be afraid to tell the Leader things he may not want to hear. Right now, for me, that person is Kingsley. My thought is that, in a decade or two, it would be you."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "And this would be, what, you doing me a favor?"

A little surprised at the sharpness of Malfoy's retort, Harry shook his head. "No, but it occurs to even me that while the information would be confidential, things you learn would probably be helpful to you in whatever you were doing. I'd be surprised if that situation wouldn't be in your interest. But hey, far be it for me to tell you what your interests are. You'll decide that over the course of time. I was just answering your question."

Malfoy nodded. "Yeah, okay, that's fair enough. Anyway... it does sound interesting, and of course I can see where it would be good for you." Malfoy gave him a quick grin, which Harry returned. "We'll see how it goes," concluded Malfoy.

"Okay. And like I said, in the meantime, I might want to informally consult with you occasionally."

"Right. Okay, well, I should get going. Maybe I'll do what that other Malfoy did, get to work on my N.E.W.T.s."

Harry laughed. "I don't think you'll need them." They stood and, virtually in unison, extended their hands to each other and shook.

As they headed for the door, Malfoy said, "If I want to get in touch, I'll pop over, knock on the door. Leave a message with the elf."

Harry nodded. "That's good. Oh, by the way, one rule for anyone who comes to this house... you have to be polite to Maria. She's a respected household employee for whom I have affection. Please treat her as such."

Malfoy theatrically rolled his eyes. "Oh, of course, I would never think of doing anything else." He shook his head as he opened the door. "Just when I start thinking that you and I have a lot in common..."

"It's what makes life interesting," joked Harry.

Malfoy paused with the door open. "If you say so. Anyway..." A more serious look came to his face. "Thanks for showing me that. I appreciate it."

Harry nodded. "Sure. See you around."

"See you," agreed Malfoy. He left, and Harry closed the door behind him.

Harry walked over to the sofa and sat down, lost in thought. Life will certainly be interesting, he mused. Hard at times, but interesting. And I have a woman I love, good friends, and the respect of a lot of society. Life is pretty good.

He suddenly remembered the message that Fred and George had put up in his bedroom, what felt like a very long time ago: Today is the first day of the rest of your life. It felt truer than ever.

The End